



Two (Swords Tarot Towerfall #2)

Author: *Kristin Cast, Gina L. Maxwell*

Category: Fantasy

Description: From the bestselling authors Kristin Cast and Gina L. Maxwell comes another spellbinding romantasy novella in the Towerfall universe, a scorching MMF romance brimming with courtly intrigue and forbidden passion.

One woman. Two forbidden men. A kingdom that could tear them apart.

After catching her fiancé in bed with someone else, Stella swore off love. But when her best friend vanishes, leaving behind only a cryptic tarot card, she's pulled through a portal into the fantasy realm of Towerfall—landing in the middle of a fight between two dangerously gorgeous warriors.

Prince Valen Greymourn has two weeks to marry, or his parents will force him to take a bride. It's a problem, considering his heart already belongs to his best friend and captain of the guard, Marek Drayk. Stella's arrival is an opportunity wrapped in temptation—if she agrees to a marriage of convenience, Valen will help her find her missing friend.

But to convince the court, Stella and Valen must play the part of passionate lovers. And Marek? He refuses to stand aside.

Behind closed doors, tension turns to touch, pretending into pleasure. Desire ignites. Lines blur. And when betrayal threatens their fragile bond, Stella faces an impossible choice—walk away from the two men who have claimed her heart, or defy an empire for a love that was never meant to exist.

Total Pages (Source): 15

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:48 am

Chapter One

Stella

Emerging from the bathroom, I practically skip down the hall, excited to continue my “wine and witchcraft” birthday celebration with my bestie-from-another-teste. Elara may not believe in the mystical or magickal like I do, but she’s always humored my eccentricities, and I love her all the more for it.

This weekend was supposed to be different—a romantic getaway to Niagara Falls with my fiancé, Darrel. But that was before I caught him slinking out of my neighbor’s apartment, fumbling with his zipper, Keesha’s fuchsia lipstick smeared all over his smug face. Three years together, and he destroyed it all in a single moment. His betrayal upended my life—everything I thought I knew.

It was then—standing in the hall, wearing my favorite tie-dyed sundress that suddenly felt too bright and cheerful for what I was witnessing, my hands full of groceries I’d just lugged up three flights of stairs—that I realized happily ever afters don’t exist. They’re nothing more than fairy-tale traps, glittering illusions that bind us to inevitable disappointment. I’m done with HEAs. From now on, I’m all about the HFBs: hookups, flings, and booty calls.

The only relationship I can trust is the one with my best friend. Elara would never leave me.

At least that’s what I thought.

Reentering my living room, I fully expect to see Elara where I left her—sitting on the throw pillows in front of the coffee table, shuffling that gorgeous, ancient tarot deck I found earlier today when I treated myself to a birthday present from a dusty, back-alley antique store. But she's not there.

"El?" I call out.

Loose sheets from my notebook litter the floor, like a gust of wind had taken them for a joyride, then abandoned them midflight. But my windows are shut tight, the candles on the table flicker steadily, and none of that explains where Elara is.

"El, where are you?"

The silence that answers sends a shiver crawling up my spine. This is New York; my apartment is the size of a shoebox, so it's not like there are hidden nooks for her to vanish into. The logical assumption would be that she had to leave—ironic considering my recent thought about her never leaving me—except her purse and cell phone are still on the couch, and she'd be as likely to leave them behind as she would her arms.

"Elara?" My voice falters as I tiptoe around my apartment.

The space feels...off. The energy is charged, electric, unsettling. A strange hum prickles my skin, and the tiny hairs on my arms stand on end. The air grows heavier as I shuffle closer to the couch.

I feel it before I consciously acknowledge it—the pull toward the tarot deck resting in the center of the coffee table.

It's as if the cards are calling to me, a subtle yet insistent tug in my chest. My legs move of their own accord, carrying me to the table, where I fold myself onto the

tasseled throw pillow. My pulse quickens as I reach for it. My fingertips brush the feathery, worn edges of the deck, and a cold shiver frosts my veins the moment I lift the cards.

A single card slips free and flutters to the floor, landing face up. I lean down to retrieve it, my heart lurching as I take in the image: a blindfolded woman sits at the edge of a dark sea, two crossed blades clutched against her chest.

The Two of Swords.

I know this card well, and as much as I love tarot, it's not the one I wanted to pull on my birthday. It's a card about choices, about indecision, about being at a crossroads. It's about pausing in the eye of the storm, balancing possibilities, and knowing deep down that inaction is its own form of surrender. It's a reminder that refusing to choose is also a choice—one that comes with its own consequences.

"I'm not at a crossroads," I scoff.

There are zero deliberations here. I've made my choice. Darrel is a pig, a walking cliché of betrayal, and I'm swearing off men forever. The end. This is my spell of sovereignty, my mantra of independence. This is what my twenty-seventh birthday is all about. This is how I'm crafting my life now, weaving it into something new and unbreakable.

But even as I say it, a chill skates along my shoulders, and the thread in my chest, the one that pulled me toward the deck in the first place, tightens around my heart.

"No," I whisper to the deck, to the Universe, to myself. "I'm done."

But am I?

The words sound hollow, as though the truth of what's inside lies just beyond my reach. Despite my objections, I feel it—the call of something larger, something unseen, something that makes my certainty waver.

It's as though the Universe Herself is watching me, testing me, daring me to move forward, to learn that perhaps the next step isn't about clinging to what I've already decided but about embracing what I'm willing to summon.

“No, no.” I shake my head, the movement sending a cascade of my short, curly brown hair bouncing around my face. “This is ridiculous,” I mutter, my voice rising as I gesture to the empty room. “I believe in magicks and tarot, but I'm over here freaking out like the Universe is conspiring against me because I'm turning twenty-seven and my relationship, my life, is falling apart.” I blow out a long breath and glance around the room. “And where the hell is Elara?”

I reach down to pick up the card. The moment my fingers close around it, the air shifts. It crackles with an electric charge that raises goose bumps along my skin. A sudden, impossible gust of wind howls through the room, whipping my hair into my face and lifting the loose pages into a swirling tornado. The candle flames dance wildly, casting frantic, distorted shadows on the walls. A scream catches in my throat as the room tilts. The floor drops out from beneath me, and before I can make sense of the chaos, it's gone.

I'm falling.

The world spirals around me into shadow and light. My body feels weightless, and I can't tell which way is up or down. I twist, disoriented, my heart hammering in my chest, and just when I think I might be trapped here forever, the darkness splits open. A burst of light stains my vision, and suddenly, I'm plummeting toward the top of a massive tree.

Branches rush toward me, their outlines sharp against the grass below. I brace myself for a torturous trip through the boughs, but an invisible force slows my descent at the last second. I land on a thick, gnarled branch, the impact jarring my whole body. Pain radiates through my limbs as I cling to the rough bark, its surface biting into my palms. My breath hitches from shock and the ache of bruises I'm certain are already forming.

Before I can get my bearings, the clash of steel slices through the air below, sharp and violent. I blink past the leaves and catch glimpses of movement—two figures, shirtless and gleaming with sweat, locked in a...sword fight? That's not something you see every—

A sharp crack vibrates up my legs, the unmistakable sound of wood giving way. The branch shudders beneath me, and I freeze, every muscle locking up. Another crack, louder this time, and the branch splinters completely. Gravity yanks me downward, leaves and twigs tearing at my skin and clothes as I tumble through the air.

My scream alerts the men, and they retract their swords just in time to avoid slicing me in half. The ground rushes up to meet me, the impact rattling every bone in my body and knocking the wind from my lungs. I land in an ungraceful heap, gasping for breath as the two men whirl to face me with their swords raised and glinting in the sunlight.

Gasping for breath, I push myself onto my knees, my vision swimming as I tilt my head back and stop dead. Towering over me are two men who look like they've stepped out of an action movie—bare-chested and sweat-streaked, every inch carved from stone.

The first's raven-black hair is sweat dampened and curls against his temples. His sharp jawline is dusted with stubble, and his full lips are pressed into a severe line. His bare chest rises and falls as he catches his breath, his muscles taut beneath a

sheen of sweat that glimmers like molten gold. The sword he grips tightly in his hand is as sharp and deadly as the aura surrounding him, a warning in the set of his shoulders and the way his narrowed gaze locks on to mine.

The other man sheathes his weapon, his golden hair catching the sunlight in a way that makes it glow. His sparkling blue eyes are startling against his sun-kissed skin, and unlike his companion, he's smiling. The curve of his lips is framed by dimples that soften his strong jaw. There's a confidence in the way he reaches out to help me as though a woman falling out of a tree—out of the sky—crash-landing between dueling swords is the most natural thing in the world.

“That was quite the entrance, my lady. Are you all right?”

I blink, struggling to process his words as the dark-haired man shifts slightly, his posture rigid, his gaze still locked on me. If I wasn't already out of breath, the sheer magnetism radiating from the two of them would've stolen it anyway.

I nod weakly, my lungs finally expanding enough to draw in air as I take his offered hand. “Y-yeah,” I manage, though every part of me aches. “I think so. Nothing's broken.”

I release his hand and try to stand on my own, but I instantly regret it when I lose my balance. The dizziness from my fall gets the better of me, and I stumble. Both men move with startling speed, catching me by the arms before I hit the ground again. They steady me between them, and their hands, firm and warm, press against my lower back. I'm sandwiched between them, my head spinning from more than just the fall.

“Easy now. Take it slow,” the blond says. “What's your name?”

The dark-haired man takes two steps back as though he's suddenly realized he never

meant to get that close to me. His intense black eyes narrow as he bends to collect his sword before sheathing it and crossing his arms over his massive chest. Without the blade, he's less overtly threatening, though he's still dangerous. There's no mistaking it. But danger has a way of being intoxicating.

"Stella," I finally say, swallowing hard as I meet the blond's expectant gaze.

A charming grin spreads across his face "Greetings, Lady Stella. I am Valen Greymourn, and this ray of sunshine is Marek Drayk, captain of my personal guard and general pain in my arse."

Marek snorts and flips him off before tucking his hand back under his arm and regarding me with those black eyes. "What were you doing in the tree?" he demands. "Spying on the crown prince? Tell me, Stella, how did you breach the castle walls?"

"That's enough, Captain," Valen says, an edge to his tone that sends Marek's gaze to the ground in acquiescence. "She's in no condition to be interrogated."

Reluctantly, Marek dips his head in acknowledgment. "Apologies, Your Highness," he grates out through clenched teeth.

"I wasn't in the tree. I mean, I was, but not for long," I stammer, realizing how absurd the truth will sound. "I...I think I fell out of the sky."

Both men stiffen at my words. Valen's grin fades, replaced by something more guarded, and Marek's dark gaze snaps back to me.

"From another realm?" Marek mutters. "Impossible."

"My thoughts exactly," I mumble, glancing around for the first time. My head is still swimming as I take in the palace courtyard, the stone walls rising high around us, and

the gilded spires that scrape the sky. This is not New York. Not even close.

“Wh-where am I?” The world begins to sway as I glance between the towering men.

“You’re in the Kingdom of Swords,” Valen says with a sweeping gesture, his smile returning faintly, though it now holds a trace of something unreadable. “Welcome, Lady Stella, to the realm of Towerfall.”

The weight of his words—the realization that I’ve fallen through some kind of celestial wormhole—hits me like a tidal wave, and the world tilts again. My legs buckle beneath me, and as the darkness closes in, I faintly hear Valen calling my name.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:48 am

Chapter Two

Valen

I catch Stella as she collapses, her body soft and warm as I cradle her limp form against my bare chest. Her skin is a deep, rich brown, smooth and radiant even in her unconscious state, her delicate features framed by an untamed halo of dark curls.

“Well, that’s convenient,” Marek says, striding to where our discarded shirts lie on the courtyard’s stone bench. He snatches his, and his sharp eyes dart back to Stella as if she’s a puzzle he’s already trying to solve.

My hungry gaze trails after him, savoring the way his muscles shift and flex beneath his dusky brown skin as he moves. Each ripple of strength is a silent reminder of the hours we’ve spent together—training, fighting, and...other things. The clanging of our blades, the adrenaline of sparring, the reason behind our impromptu session—it all fades to the background as my thoughts drift toward far more enticing pursuits. I imagine new ways to strip that carefully guarded control from him, to make him beg for release in my bedchamber.

Marek is many things to me. One could say he is all things to me. He began as my best friend, became my foster brother, then my sparring partner, eventually earning his title as captain of my personal guard, and, for the past seven years, my lover. I cannot remember a time when he didn’t occupy some corner of my heart. Despite the fact that he is my subordinate, my captain, and my submissive, Marek Drayk owns me, heart and soul.

Which is why the earlier conversation with my parents made my blood boil. Marek, ever the attentive one, spotted the frustration on my face and dragged me into a grueling sparring session to burn off the anger. And, I suspect, to redirect my focus to him. It worked. It always does.

He pulls his shirt on, and the disappointment that flickers across my face must be obvious, because he arches a brow at me, the ghost of a smirk playing on his lips. Without the distraction of his bare skin, I'm reminded of the woman in my arms and the words Marek just spoke. "What is it you find convenient, Drayk?"

My grip tightens slightly on Stella, her limp form pressed against me as I carry her toward the bench. There's something about her that I can't quite put into words. Wild beauty and mystery aside, she feels like more than just a passing disruption.

"Her fainting," Marek says, tossing my blue tunic over my shoulder before holding out his arms to take Stella. "Now she won't cause a scene on the way to the dungeon."

I start to transfer her but pull back when his words register. "She's not a criminal, for gods' sakes. She's an otherworlder. We should take her to my parents and offer her hospitality, not imprison the poor girl."

He rolls his eyes, a gesture I rarely allow to go unpunished. "The tales of people appearing from other realms are just that—tales. Myths. She's either a villager who somehow bypassed the palace gates or—and this would be my bet—she's a spy from another kingdom. Possibly an assassin."

A chuckle bubbles up my throat, but I choke it back before it can escape. I know Marek's suspicion is born of his duty to protect me, both as my personal guard and my lover. But he knows as well as I do that this woman is no assassin. The idea is laughable. And if she is a spy, she's a dreadful one, given her conspicuous and utterly

graceless, ill-timed fall from a tree and the clothing that sets her apart from anyone else in Towerfall. She could never go unnoticed in that strange, bright fabric with the cut unlike any I've seen before. However, instead of pointing out the obvious, I take a different approach.

"To clarify," I say, shifting Stella slightly in my arms as I look at him, "your plan is to keep her sequestered until we can determine who she is and why she's here?"

"That is my plan, yes." He straightens his shoulders and lifts his chin just enough to remind me that although he may bow to me as his prince and his lover, when it comes to my protection, he's the one in charge.

"Fair enough then. Let's go." I turn with Stella in my arms and stride in the opposite direction of the palace, heading toward the archway that leads from the courtyard to the gardens and the property beyond.

I don't have to look back to know that Marek is frowning at me. True to form, he catches up within seconds, falling into step beside me.

"Valen," he says, his tone laced with irritation, "this is not the way to the dungeon. Where are you going?"

"I'm abiding by your plan," I say, keeping my stride steady. "We'll sequester her in your cottage until we know her origin and purpose."

Marek halts midstep, then quickly resumes walking, his glare burning into the side of my face. "That was not my plan, and you know it," he grumbles.

I glance over at him, a grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. "Sure it is. I simply modified it."

* * *

Ten minutes later, we arrive at Marek's cottage, a striking structure nestled within the palace grounds. The building is constructed of smooth gray stone with veins of silver that glint in the sunlight. Stained-glass windows in rich shades of purple and amethyst gleam from their frames, casting fragmented patterns of light and shadow onto the cobbled path as we approach.

Inside, the air carries the faint scents of pine and wood polish. Silver accents gleam from the edges of furniture, and deep purple fabrics draped over armchairs and stitched into the cushions of the couch in his study soften the space.

I lay Stella on the couch. Marek follows me, moving silently to the glass-paned double doors and securing the locks from the outside.

I cross the hall to the sitting room and drop my tunic on the couch on my way to the sideboard table holding crystal decanters filled with an array of spirits. I reach for my preferred honey whiskey and pour a generous amount in a glass.

"I need a drink," I say, the golden liquid catching the light as I swirl it in the crystal. "Would you like one, love?"

Marek shakes his head, his jaw tight as he leans against the doorframe. "No, thank you. I won't risk an addled mind while harboring a potentially dangerous prisoner. Someone needs to be alert."

A low laugh escapes me as I take a slow sip, the warmth of the whiskey spreading through my chest. "Your vigilance is admirable as always, love, but I think you're overestimating the danger she poses."

His gaze hardens. "And I think you're underestimating it. She could be a damned

sorceress, for all you know, and you're acting as if she's an ally."

"Perhaps she will be," I say, setting the glass down and turning to face him fully. "In fact, I believe she might be the solution to a very pressing problem."

Marek frowns, suspicion etching lines. "And what problem would that be?"

I cross the room, the wheels in my mind already turning, the spark of an idea flaring brighter with each step. Stopping just short of where he's standing, I rest a hand lightly on his chest. "The problem my parents saddled me with this morning when they informed me I have two weeks to find a woman to marry."

"That was the issue?" His nostrils flare, and he pushes off the doorframe, towering over me despite our similar heights. "They're demanding you marry? Already?"

"That's why I was so furious earlier." A hint of the anger burns beneath my skin, and I take a deep breath. "They caught me off guard, Marek. It wasn't just the demand to marry—it was the way they framed it, as if I were some child needing to be scolded and forced into line."

His jaw tightens, and his hands flex into fists. "Not just marry then. They expect you to breed heirs. To ensure the line."

"Exactly. All that tedious business," I reply with a dismissive wave. "You know I have no desire for anyone but you. But if I don't comply, my parents will summon every eligible woman within the kingdom and parade them before me like elaborately wrapped gifts."

I shouldn't be so resentful. My parents have allowed me more freedom than most crown princes are afforded. They love Marek like a son and have supported our relationship from the start. It's why they gave me the role of our kingdom's

emissary—so Marek and I would have time to be together before my duty came calling. I thought I was ready for this moment, prepared for the inevitability of my royal responsibilities.

But I'm not. Not in the fucking least.

"We knew this time would come." Marek's lips press into a thin line. "You can't ignore your duty, Valen."

"I'm not planning to." My grin sharpens as I gesture toward the locked study doors. "That's where she comes in."

Marek's frown deepens, skepticism radiating from every tense line of his body. "What are you suggesting?"

"Stella and I will enter into a marriage of convenience," I say, my tone matter-of-fact, as though the plan is already a foregone conclusion, because it is...basically. "It will buy us the time we need."

Marek crosses his arms. "Time for what?"

"For my younger brother to come of age and take on the burden of producing heirs," I explain, the plan forming in my mind with razor-sharp clarity. "Lance has always been more inclined toward familial duty anyway. When Stella and I are married, I'll tell my parents I intend to continue my duties as emissary—traveling with my bride, of course—until she's with child. Once we're out of the Kingdom of Swords, she can go her own way. It'll be our little secret. And in a few years, when Lance is old enough, I'll manufacture a tragic accident for my 'beloved' and remain in mourning indefinitely."

"You're delusional."

“You pronounced ‘brilliant’ wrong, my love,” I say with a wink.

Marek doesn’t take the bait. He shakes his head, his frustration palpable. “And you think this woman, this otherworlder, this complete stranger will agree to such a scheme?”

“The beauty of it is that she doesn’t have much of a choice, does she?” I shrug. “She’s utterly alone and entirely at our mercy.”

“This is reckless,” he snaps. “Even if she poses no threat, you’re assuming she’ll go along with this madness. And what happens if she refuses? Or worse, exposes us for attempting it?”

“If she wants safety, if she wants security, she’ll do exactly as she’s told.”

Even as I say it, a pang of guilt twists in my chest. I know I’m being an ass. But fuck it, I’m desperate. This isn’t how I want to lead or who I want to be, but my options are dwindling, and the stakes are higher than I’ve ever faced. If I waver, if I lose my grip now, everything I’ve fought for—everything Marek and I have built—could slip through my fingers.

I swallow hard. Straightening my spine and doubling down. “Are you questioning my judgment, Drayk?”

“Damn right I am,” he growls, his dark eyes blazing with a mixture of anger and something far more primal that has my cock already at half-mast. “You’re gambling with our lives. With your throne .”

Tension crackles between us, and I let it build. My heart pounds in my chest, but I keep my expression composed, even as his dark gaze stirs something hot and possessive deep inside me.

“Kneel,” I command.

He freezes, his breath hitching as the weight of the order settles over him. The defiance in his eyes flickers, warring with his desire to obey. His jaw tightens, and the air thickens with the silence that stretches between us.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Marek,” I warn, the deliberate use of his given name laced with an authority that leaves no room for disobedience.

His shoulders tense, and frustration vibrates through every inch of his body. For a moment, I think he might resist outright, but he doesn’t.

He never does.

He exhales sharply and sinks to his knees before me. He clasps his hands behind his back and affixes his gaze to the floor. The sight sends a rush of satisfaction and desire roaring through me, my erection hard as steel and throbbing. I step closer, and my hand moves almost instinctively. I grip his chin possessively, my fingers firm as I tilt his face upward. His dark eyes meet mine, burning with an intensity that makes my cock throb against the confines of my breeches.

“I think it’s time you’re reminded which of us is truly in charge here,” I murmur. My thumb drags across his full lower lip, savoring the way his breath stutters under my touch. “Now be a good boy, and take out my cock.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:48 am

Chapter Three

Stella

I wake slowly, my body heavy and my head pounding in rhythmic throbs that make it hard to focus. The couch beneath me is plush, but the unfamiliar scent of pine sets me on edge. This isn't right.

Blinking, I clear the haze and take in my surroundings. The room is bathed in the warm glow of firelight from a hearth set into the far wall. Shelves upon shelves of books line the space, their spines worn and mismatched. A large wooden desk dominates one corner, cluttered with parchment, quills, and a brass inkwell that shines in the flickering light. Heavy drapes hang over a single stained-glass window, muting its purples and silvers. The room feels like it belongs to another era entirely.

This is not my apartment. I am not in New York.

I sit up, wincing as my head protests the movement, and the events of the past hours—days?—begin to filter through my foggy mind. The last thing I remember is falling out of that damn tree. Or, more accurately, falling through the tree. It's not like I climbed up there to begin with. I plummeted into it before landing at the feet of the two men.

Valen and...Marek. Their names come back to me in fragments, along with their words. Something about swords. A kingdom. Towerfall. The words echo faintly, disjointed and distant, as my thoughts race—New York, the tarot deck, Elara...

Elara.

Did the same thing happen to her? Is this where she disappeared to?

I glance down, relieved to find I'm still clothed. The fabric is slightly wrinkled but otherwise untouched.

I need to find Elara. I need to get back home.

A low murmur of voices pulls me from my spiraling thoughts, and my heart skips as I realize I'm not alone. Silently, I creep across the room toward the French doors. Pressing myself against the solid wood frame, I lean just enough to peer around the edge. Through the glass, I catch sight of the two men standing in the room across the hall.

They're arguing, their voices too low for me to make out the words, but the tension is unmistakable. Marek's arms are crossed, the white fabric of his shirt straining across his muscular arms and broad chest. Valen, on the other hand, is completely composed, his princely air evident even when half-naked.

Despite their contrasting demeanors and the clear divide in their stations—prince and captain of the guard—Marek's tone is sharp. It's clear he doesn't defer to Valen like a guard should his prince, and I can't help but think they share a closer bond than their titles imply.

The argument intensifies, and Valen's hand slices through the air as he gestures to the floor between them. Whatever he says makes Marek's shoulders stiffen. His jaw tightens, the muscle jumping beneath his skin. Marek looks like he might argue further, but then he lowers himself to his knees, bows his head and clasps his hands behind his back.

Valen steps closer. My fingertips dig into the frame of the glass as he looms over Marek. Valen takes Marek's chin and tilts his face upward. The prince's lips move, his words inaudible from where I stand, but their effect on Marek is undeniable.

The captain's hands move. Slowly, he unties the laces of Valen's pants. My stomach flips, and my eyes widen when the prince's cock comes into view. Long, thick, and flushed a deep shade of rose, it curves slightly upward. Veins trace along its impressive length, and even from here, I can see the head glistening with his arousal.

Marek's lips part, and he leans forward, taking Valen into his mouth with practiced ease. My body reacts before my mind catches up. Heat pools low in my belly, and I press my thighs together, trying to quell the ache.

Valen fists his hands in Marek's hair, his grip firm as he guides each movement. His expression is a blend of satisfaction and dominance as he tilts his head down and watches Marek work—every flick of his tongue, every twist of his hand, every powerful suck...

It's erotic as hell, and I am completely captivated.

I'm no stranger to attraction, but this? This is something else entirely. It's raw and real and has a pull so strong it leaves me dizzy.

I may have sworn off relationships and love after the Darrel shit show, but a hot hookup with two gorgeous men like them? My pulse races, and my lips curve into a wry smile as I lean closer to the glass.

Yeah, I definitely wouldn't say no to that.

The thought barely registers before reality slams into me. What the hell am I doing? I have bigger priorities—like finding Elara and getting back to New York. This is my

chance. They're distracted. I can use this moment to slip away and figure out where the hell I am.

My breaths are shallow as I reach for the door handle. I give it a slow twist. It's locked? Please, no, it can't be locked. The Universe wouldn't drop me into this world only for me to end up locked in a room. She wouldn't allow it. Desperation flares in my chest, and I yank harder. The handle rattles, and my blood runs cold as the muffled moans coming from the other side of the door stop.

Both men freeze midmotion, and my blood runs cold as they turn to face me.

Valen tucks himself back into his pants with unhurried grace while Marek rises to his feet. He's pissed, but I'm not sure if it's because I interrupted them or because I exist at all.

By the time they cross the hall, Valen has pulled his tunic over his head, every inch the composed prince once more. Marek pulls a long brass key from his pocket, slides it into the keyhole, and twists. I jump out of the way as the doors swing open, and they stride into the room. Without a word, Marek pulls a chair from the desk and places it in the middle of the study. Before I can protest, he grabs my shoulders and pushes down until my ass hits the seat.

My heart pounds as I stare at them, and suddenly, my thoughts dart to the scene I just witnessed. They know I saw. I know they know I saw. What if they want to silence me? Words tumble out of my mouth before I can stop them. "Don't worry. I won't tell anyone what happened. What you two were...doing. I swear."

Valen raises an eyebrow while Marek simply stares.

"Why would we care who you told?" the prince asks. "Our relationship isn't a secret." Valen lowers onto the couch opposite my chair and relaxes back into the

cushions. “We’re not ashamed of who we are or what we share. Perhaps it’s different where you’re from?”

“Well...” I pause, trying to find a tactful way to phrase it. “People can be, uh, pretty shitty where I’m from. You know, judgmental. Closed-minded. Like, my coworker’s brother, total nightmare, found out his son was dating—”

“Enough distractions.” Marek moves directly in front of me, cutting off my view of Valen. Unlike the prince, there’s no hint of amusement in his sharp gaze. “Time for you to answer some questions. You’re clearly not a spy or an assassin. Are you a sorceress?”

I huff out a breath and cross my arms. “I wish.”

“Drayk,” Valen says, his tone conveying something to his captain I’m not privy to. But whatever it is, Marek switches from making outlandish accusations to simple questioning.

“Who are you, and where did you come from?”

I glance between them, my pulse racing. Whatever I say next could determine whether I make it out of this place alive.

“As I said before, my name is Stella,” I begin, forcing my voice to remain steady despite the panic rising in my chest. “I’m from New York.”

The men glance at each other, then back at me, the location clearly not registering.

“It’s in the United States,” I add quickly, hoping for some spark of recognition. Still nothing. “Of America. Earth? Anything?”

Their stares remain blank, and my stomach drops to my toes.

Okay, Stella, don't panic. The Universe knows what She's doing. She put you here for a reason. Accept the path, and let Her guide you.

I take a deep breath and cling to that reassurance. "I was at home with my friend. We were getting ready to do tarot readings for each other with this new deck I found at this eerie little antique store. I stepped out of the room for a few minutes, and when I came back, Elara was gone. Vanished into thin air. I felt this strange energy coming off the tarot deck, and when I picked it up, one of the cards jumped out. Next thing I knew, I fell through some kind of wormhole, landed in a tree, and, well... You know the rest."

Valen leans to the side and rests his elbow on the arm of the couch. "And your friend. Did you find where she ran off to?"

I shrug, the knot of concern tightening in my stomach. "I know Elara didn't leave my apartment. So as absolutely shocking as this whole interworld travel thing is and as much as it shouldn't make sense, her ending up here like I did is the only thing that does."

"And you have no idea where she is within Towerfall?"

"I have no idea where I am. I didn't even know this place existed until I fell out of the sky."

Marek crosses his arms over his chest, his dark eyes narrowing. "You've never heard of Towerfall? Not even whispers of other realms where you're from?"

"Not a thing." I shake my head. "And that is something I would remember."

“There are stories,” Valen continues. “Legends of travelers who cross realms, though they’re rare. Some are drawn here by choice, others by accident, and a few...” He tilts his head, studying me. “By the will of Towerfall itself.”

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. “So you’re saying I was meant to be here?”

“Perhaps,” he muses. “Or perhaps it’s just chance. Either way, you seem to be at a bit of a crossroads.”

“A crossroads?” I frown.

Shit. The Two of Swords.

“Yeah, I’m getting that a lot. But I know exactly where I’m going.”

“Well, Stella, as I see it, you have two options,” Valen replies with a cryptic smile. “You can either take a path that will lead you through this realm alone, where there are dangers you know nothing of, in a desperate and most likely futile attempt to locate your friend on your own. Or...”

“Or?” I echo, goose bumps cresting along my arms.

Valen tilts his chin. “You could choose to hear the proposal I’d like to offer you.”

I swallow. “And what are you proposing?”

“If you agree to help me, I’ll do everything in my power to help you find your friend and get you both home.”

I don’t look at Marek as I ask warily, “What kind of help?”

“A temporary arrangement,” Valen replies, his tone measured. “One that will benefit us both.”

I take a steadying breath and continue to avoid Marek’s gaze. I have to believe the Universe brought me here for a reason. She dropped me firmly on this path.

Go with it, Stella. Trust.

Plus, what other options do I have?

But trust doesn’t come easily. Not after Darrel, not after betrayal, not after my world cracked open and sent me hurtling into this one.

I chew my lower lip.

Valen has the kind of presence that could convince someone the sky was green if he set his mind to it. I don’t know him. I don’t know them. And they definitely do not know me.

But then there’s Elara. My best friend. My sister. She’s out there somewhere, probably terrified and just as lost as I am. I can’t do anything for her from here, not without help.

“All right,” I say finally. “I’m listening.”

Chapter Four

Marek

The midday sun gleams off the rain-streaked cobblestones of the town's bustling square, but its warmth does nothing to soften my mood. The chatter of merchants hawking their wares mingles with the sweet aroma of roasted nuts and spiced cider. It grates against my nerves. I am in no state to appreciate any of it.

It's been two days since Stella reluctantly agreed to Valen's plan—a decision that came only after hours of discussion, her frustration, and ultimately, her quiet resignation. Her friend's life was too great a weight on the scales to allow for any other choice. And though she clearly didn't trust us entirely, the desperation in her eyes told me she didn't feel as if she had any better options.

Since then, Valen has worked tirelessly to prepare her for the role she'll play. He briefed her on the intricacies of the Kingdom of Swords, its history, its customs, and the expectations that come with being betrothed to the crown prince. Valen has noted how attentive and sharp she is, and although I have witnessed a bit of that myself, I'll never admit it to him...or her.

Still, none of it loosens the tight knot of unease in my chest as we navigate the square.

As is typical when the crown prince ventures outside the palace walls and into the heart of the kingdom, I have meticulously planned our route. Uniformed guards are stationed strategically along the path while others are disguised as townspeople,

blending in and keeping pace with us. This allows my attention to remain where it's needed most—on Valen. On ensuring nothing and no one makes it past the first two lines of defense.

But my eyes are drawn, reluctantly and infuriatingly, to Stella.

One of the silk dresses I personally rushed out to purchase for her as a favor to my prince twirls around her slender ankles as she walks beside Valen. Her dark, unruly curls catch the sunlight, the strands glowing a deep, rich mahogany that only highlights her warm, russet skin. They make a striking pair, and their chemistry, fake as it may be, is undeniable. It won't be hard to sell the story of their immediate and mutual infatuation.

She tips her head back, laughing at something Valen says, relaxed and at ease as though she's lived here her whole life. As though she's known him as I do.

I grit my teeth and force my gaze to sweep the crowd. She's beautiful. I can admit that much. But beauty is often the first weapon wielded by the cunning, and I'll not let her distract me from the task at hand.

Valen and Stella pause at a market stall filled with sparkling wares. Stella picks up a set of delicate crystal goblets, her rich brown eyes lighting up with a feigned enthusiasm. "Perfect for a toast to eternal bliss, don't you agree, my love?," she says, holding one up to the light. "I think they're exquisite."

Valen smiles down at her, looking for all the world like the besotted prince he wants them to see. "Almost as much as you, darling." He turns to me with an infuriating glint in his eyes. "Drayk," he calls, the teasing note in his voice daring me to play along, "isn't my bride-to-be exquisite?"

He's having entirely too much fun with this.

If I trusted anyone else with his safety, I'd step aside to avoid this farce. But I don't, and I can't, so I square my shoulders and refuse to rise to the bait.

"It's not my place to notice such things, Your Highness. My focus is solely on protecting you." Even if it's from yourself.

Valen looks perfectly at ease, but I don't trust Stella or this reckless plan. Even if her story is true—if the tales of travel between realms hold any merit—truth doesn't mean innocence. She's clever, that much is clear, and that makes her dangerous. Besides, beautiful or not, Stella isn't my concern. Valen's safety is. And I'll be damned if I let anything compromise it.

His laugh rings out, rich and warm, a sound that never fails to stir something deep within me, no matter how irritated I am with him. "That's all right, Captain. I'm noticing enough for the both of us." He winks at me before returning his attention to Stella. His lips curve into a smile that sends an unwelcome tightness through my chest. "And as for the goblets, I think they're perfect for our celebration. We'll take them."

The merchant beams, practically falling over himself as Valen hands over a few silver coins. He's playing his part well, ensuring every merchant within earshot hears the crown prince's enthusiastic participation in wedding preparations. No doubt the whispers of this performance will reach the king and queen before the sun sets.

Trailing a few steps behind, I can't decide which emotion is louder: the jealousy that twists in my gut, the love that makes my heart ache, or the overwhelming protectiveness that drives every step I take. Valen's laughter mingles with Stella's, and my jaw clenches hard enough to hurt. It's not just that Valen is pretending to court her—it's that he seems to be enjoying it.

"Captain," Valen calls over his shoulder, his tone light but with that subtle edge I

know all too well. “What do you think? Should we go with white roses or red for the banquet hall?”

I glare at him, my mood sour enough to curdle milk. “Whatever you prefer, Your Highness.”

He arches a brow, clearly entertained by my irritation. “Oh, come now, don’t be shy. Your opinion matters greatly to me.”

“Yes, Captain Drayk,” Stella adds, “please weigh in. Should we go with white roses for purity”—Stella turns to me, her eyes sparkling as she steps closer and lowers her voice for just the three of us—“or would red for passion be more to your tastes?”

The image her words conjure slams into me. White and red roses dissolve into flashes of her tangled in silk sheets, her curls spilling over Valen’s chest as my hands grip her hips. The heat of their bodies, the pull of her lips, the thought of all three of us—

Godsdamn it. I cut the thought off and lock it away before it can spiral any further. My fists tighten at my sides, the frustration at my own arousal burning hotter than anything else. She must indeed be a sorceress, for now she’s bewitching us both.

“Neither,” I grumble. Crossing my arms, I glare at them. “I think black suits the occasion best.”

Stella’s laughter is soft, teasing, and it does nothing to ease the tightness in my chest. Valen’s grin widens, his amusement clear as he exchanges a glance with her before turning his focus back on me. “Well, it’s good to know where you stand.”

We continue through the market, Valen and Stella falling easily back into their playful banter while I stew in silence. Every smile they share feels like a dagger, every laugh a twist of the blade. I keep my focus on the task—watching for threats,

ensuring their safety—but no amount of vigilance can drown out the gnawing thoughts in my mind.

It's been only a few days since we began this charade, and yet Valen is playing the part of a smitten prince far too convincingly. Too easily. I've seen him charm nobles and dignitaries and slip into roles as effortlessly as breathing, but this is different. The warmth in his eyes when he looks at her, the way he leans into her laughter—it doesn't feel like acting.

He hasn't responded to anyone like this in years. Not since us. I know Valen better than anyone, and even I can't tell if it's an elaborate performance or if Stella has truly bewitched him in a matter of days.

My mood darkens as we near my cottage. By the time the golden light of the setting sun filters through the trees, I can barely appreciate its beauty.

Valen leads Stella into the sitting room while I linger near the door. I cross my arms and watch him gesture for her to sit in my usual chair in front of the hearth. The sight only fuels my irritation. That chair is mine—my sanctuary after long days of ensuring his safety, of protecting the very kingdom he will one day rule. Now it's just another part of this farce.

He crouches and starts a fire, the warmth of the flames chasing away the chill that comes with dusk. Straightening, he turns to me, his expression a mix of exasperation and amusement. "You've been pouting all day, Drayk. It's unbecoming."

"I've been doing my job," I counter. "Not all of us have the luxury of gallivanting around town without a care in the world."

"Gallivanting? Is that what you call it?" Valen's smirk only fans the flames of my displeasure.

I open my mouth to retort, but before I can get a word out, he steps closer, the curve of his lips deepening. “I think it’s time we address your attitude, Captain.”

My spine stiffens, my arms tightening across my chest. “Address my—”

“Stella,” Valen interrupts, “would you care to see how I discipline the captain?”

Surprise brightens her features before it’s quickly replaced by a glint of mischief. “Oh, absolutely.”

“Excellent,” he says as he removes his shirt, the muscles of his chest and shoulders catching the firelight. He tosses it over the other wingback that we treat as a makeshift throne, if only because I love to kneel at his feet when he sits there. “Then make yourself comfortable, my lady, and enjoy the show.” Valen’s attention shifts back to me, his gaze sharpening, commanding. “Remove your clothes, please.”

“Valen—” I begin to protest.

He arches a thick brow, not in challenge but genuine curiosity. “Are you telling me no, Marek?”

Our relationship is far from conventional. It’s a dynamic forged in trust, devotion, and boundaries we respect implicitly. The depths of our desires—the way we explore power, submission, and love—might make many uncomfortable, but it’s ours. And one of the most sacred rules between us is that either of us can refuse, no questions asked. A simple “no” is all it takes to halt everything.

The tension in the room thickens as I hesitate. My pride wars with the deep, unshakable need to obey him. And there’s something else now. Something unexpected and new. A desire for Stella to bear witness to the love I have for this magnificent man, the lengths to which I will go to serve him, to worship him, to

suffer for him.

At last, I swallow hard, the battle within me resolving. I lower my gaze for a moment, not in submission but to steady myself, then meet his eyes again. “No, my prince, I’m not.”

Valen studies me carefully, his instincts with me honed well enough to detect the faintest hint of dishonesty. I hold his gaze confidently, letting him see the truth in my eyes, the trust, the devotion.

Finally, he nods. “Then do as I commanded, and approach me.”

Stella stirs in her chair. Her curiosity is evident, and the heat of her attention swirls at the base of my spine.

I undress, quick and efficient as I’ve already pushed Valen’s patience enough for one day. As I strip off each piece of clothing, the warmth of the firelight brushes over my bare skin, licking at the most sensitive places. The heat within me intensifies with the prickling awareness of Stella’s gaze, the hiss of the flames, and, most of all, the magnetic pull of Valen. He’s devastating like this, his lean, muscular frame illuminated by the firelight. His golden skin seems to glow, every line of his body sculpted and precise.

I cross the room to stand between the chairs, facing the fireplace. My heart pounds, the rhythm echoing in my ears, vibrating beneath my skin.

“You know what to do,” Valen says casually.

Before I’ve fully processed the command, my knees hit the floor. It’s automatic, driven by years of trust and practice.

My hands clasp behind my back, and I lower my gaze, the familiar blend of humiliation and arousal burning through me. Every nerve is alive, every sensation heightened as Valen steps closer.

His hand grips my chin, and he forces my head up until my eyes meet his. His expression is unreadable at first, but then it softens just enough to send a shiver down my spine.

“Good boy,” he murmurs, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip. The words alone make my pulse race, my body responding to the praise with a heat that burns low and deep. “Now, let’s show Stella one of my favorite forms of discipline, shall we?”

I don’t dare move when he walks away—not even my eyes stray from the empty space where he stood a moment ago—but I don’t need to see him to know what’s happening. The creak of the wooden toy chest’s lid fills the air, and I know exactly where he’s gone.

That chest holds a collection of implements—tools designed for both pleasure and pain, depending on Valen’s mood. The click of the lid latching and the thud of his boots on the floorboards as he returns send a ripple of anticipation through me. My breathing quickens, my body betraying me as I steel myself for whatever comes next.

“This,” Valen begins, still out of my line of sight, his voice laced with wicked satisfaction, “should help adjust his attitude rather nicely.”

Stella’s quiet gasp sends a fresh wave of heat through me, but I keep my gaze forward, my posture rigid. “What is that?”

Valen steps into view. There’s a wicked gleam in his eyes as he reveals the hollow metal implement no more than four inches in length. I suck in a breath and curse my growing cock, knowing it’s going to make this particular punishment even more

intense.

Valen notices immediately, his grin widening into something devilish and victorious.

“This, my dear Stella,” he says, his gaze never leaving mine, “is a chastity cage.”

Chapter Five

Valen

At the start, I couldn't have predicted the twists and turns this week would take. My parents, ever the arbiters of my destiny, disrupted an otherwise peaceful breakfast with their decree that I must marry in two weeks' time. Before I could even begin to formulate a plan, a solution to that very problem fell quite literally out of the sky and into my lap. Now I'm embarking on a scheme with an otherworlder to deceive not only my parents but the entire kingdom into believing I've accepted my royal obligations.

Stella herself has been the most unexpected twist of all. I'd braced myself for resistance, for an uphill battle to persuade her to go along with my plan. I'd even been prepared to bribe her with gold and jewels if only she would help us. But she hasn't asked for riches or titles, not even the smallest favor for herself. She only wants help finding her friend. Simple and selfless and completely revealing.

Spending the afternoon with her in the market was surprisingly enjoyable. She was confident, charming, and quick to laugh. She navigated the ruse with ease and had no problems convincing the merchants and townsfolk of our supposed affection. There were moments when I could almost forget it was all a performance. If I were truly looking for a wife and future queen, it's easy to picture a life content with her.

But those musings are nothing more than idle thoughts. My heart belongs to another, and tonight is not about duty or pretense. Tonight is about indulgence and surrendering to the dark, electric bond that tethers Marek to me, binding us in ways

no traditional marriage ever could.

I turn my gaze to him, the firelight dancing over his bare shoulders as he kneels obediently before me. The flickering flames kiss his skin, highlighting the taut lines of his muscles, the tension coiling beneath his calm exterior. Anticipation radiates from his every breath, a subtle tremor, the only chink in his armor.

I grip the chastity cage. My fingers trail over the cool metal, and Marek's cock twitches. Crouching down, I level my gaze with his.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," I murmur, the words curling between us like smoke.

My hand steadies his shaft, ensuring it stays soft enough to slip the device into place. The hollow cage encases him snugly, binding him in a deliberate state of restrained arousal. I secure the cold metal ring behind his testicles and around the root of his shaft. Finally, I pinch the tiny padlock into place with a satisfying click.

Marek's cock immediately strains against its confines, and he hisses softly. The sound is a delicious mixture of discomfort and pleasure that sends a purr of satisfaction down my spine.

"Who do you belong to, Marek?" I ask, brushing my thumb over the padlock.

"To you, my prince," he rasps, his voice thick with emotion and need.

"Good boy," I say softly and rise to my full height. My hands move to the laces of my trousers. As the fabric falls away, my cock springs free, already hard and aching. I step closer, anticipation thrumming between us. Marek leans forward without hesitation, his obedience absolute. His mouth envelops me with exquisite warmth, his tongue and lips working in perfect, practiced harmony. My fingers weave into his

hair, guiding him as he takes me deeper.

The sight of him on his knees, his submission and devotion so freely given, sends a wave of love and desire crashing through me. I'll never tire of this—of him. He is my sanctuary, the one constant in a world that demands more than I've ever been willing to give.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch movement. Stella, seated in the chair across from us, is utterly transfixed. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips parted slightly as she watches Marek bob on my cock, his tongue swirling before moving lower to suck on my heavy sac. Her thighs press together, betraying her own mounting arousal. Her breath quickens, shallow and unsteady, as though she's fighting to restrain herself from moving closer.

I smirk and let my gaze linger on her legs before locking eyes with her. "Would you like to experience Marek's talented mouth for yourself?"

Her eyes widen, and she blinks in surprise before a sly smile curves her lips. "If you're offering," she says, her voice breathy but firm. "Yes, I believe I'd like that very much."

I tug gently on Marek's hair, and he releases me, his lips swollen and glistening. "Go to her," I command, "and show her the same devotion you show me."

Marek rises to his feet, the strain of the chastity cage evident in the rigid line of his back. He crosses the short distance to Stella, and I see the shift in him before he even reaches her. The submissive part of him—the one that bends to my will and that only I can coax out—is replaced by his true alpha nature.

I settle into my chair, stroking myself leisurely as I enjoy the show.

Stella's eyes glitter with anticipation, her chest rising and falling as she gets a better look at Marek's cock straining against the metal confines of the cage. A blush creeps across her cheeks, the color deepening as her gaze lingers. Slowly, she begins to reach out with one hand, as though mesmerized by the idea of mapping the punished flesh with her fingertips.

"Wow, that looks..."

Marek's hand shoots out, and he stops her with a firm grip on her wrist. He places both of her hands on the high back of the chair. "Do not move them."

It's his turn to command, his voice low and edged with a tone he's never used with me. The authority in his words, hearing him use it with her, sends a new kind of spark through me, igniting my desire in unexpected ways.

Stella stills, her lips parting in a soft exhale, her body yielding to the command. Marek kneels before her, his large hands lifting her skirts. The fabric bunches around her waist, exposing miles of brown skin from her hips to her toes.

She'd been happy to change into the dress we provided but drew the line at the undergarments, claiming she never wore them in her world either. Something about nature and energy. I barely retained the explanation, my thoughts spiraling into an endless loop of imagining her bare and exposed.

As though reading my mind, Marek yanks her ass forward and spreads her legs wide. His hands grip her thighs as he hooks her knees over the armrests, holding her open to our hungry gazes.

The firelight casts a warm glow over her skin, the faint sheen of her arousal glistening, and my cock twitches in my hand as I stroke myself harder.

“Fuck, that’s a pretty cunt,” Marek rasps, and I couldn’t agree more.

A neatly trimmed thatch of dark curls crowns her mons, but the rest of her sex is bare, her folds slick and wet. She’s stunning. A beautiful flower with tawny petals and a pink center, begging to be worshipped. And worship Marek does.

He lowers his head, his breath ghosting over her entrance. Stella’s soft gasp fills the room, blending with the crackle of the fire and the rapid beating of my own heart.

The moment Marek’s tongue makes contact, Stella’s head falls back, and a needy moan escapes her lips. The sound is raw, uninhibited, and it makes my cock throb in my hand. Marek’s tongue traces the length of her slit before swirling around her sensitive nub. He alternates between flicking it and drawing it into his mouth, his hands gripping her thighs to hold her in place.

“Marek,” Stella moans, her fingers digging into the top of the chair as her body arches toward him. Her breathless cries tangle with the wet sounds of his tongue working her and the occasional groan of appreciation that rumbles from his throat.

The firelight catches the sheen of arousal coating Marek’s stubbled chin as he feasts on her, his lips closing around her bundle of nerves to suckle before plunging his tongue deep inside her cunt. Stella cries out, her body trembling under the relentless onslaught of his mouth.

Her moans are matched by Marek’s low, throaty growls, the sounds vibrating against her flesh and driving her higher. He’s ravenous, alternating between licking and sucking, his tongue delving deep into her core before pulling back to lavish more attention on her swollen bud. Each glide of his tongue draws a sharper cry from her lips, and her thighs visibly quiver against his strong hands.

My own arousal surges at the sight of her unraveling for him. Every gasp, every arch

of her back, every shuddering moan stokes the fire burning low in my gut. I stroke myself harder, my breaths coming out clipped and ragged.

The pangs of jealousy I expected from watching Marek with another are markedly—and blessedly—absent. We’ve shared women before, long ago, in the reckless years of our youth. But since becoming lovers ourselves, we’ve never invited anyone else into our bed. Stella wasn’t meant to be an exception. My initial plan had been simple: as she was the reason for his bad attitude, letting her witness his subjugation to me seemed a fitting punishment. But seeing her body’s response to us changed everything. I abandoned the plan and followed my instincts.

And fuck, has it paid off.

Desire licks at my balls as furiously as the flames over the logs in the hearth. I can’t remember the last time I was this hard. If I’m not careful, I’ll come before Stella.

My gaze drifts to Marek’s leaking cock and the cruel cage that amplifies his torment and the pleasure he derives from it. His body is a work of art. Bronze skin stretched over coiled muscles begs my fingers to touch and my tongue to trace. His back is arched slightly, his knees apart, and that glorious ass I love so much is on full display.

A wicked thought takes root, one that sends a fresh wave of heat through me. I imagine sliding my cock into Marek’s tight hole as he continues to feast on Stella. Or taking her with him pinned between us, his hard cock pressed against her soft belly, his only friction delivered by my thrusts inside her. The possibilities are endless, and each is more intoxicating than the last.

Stella lets out a high moan as Marek buries two digits deep inside her cunt. He pulls back briefly, his lips coated in her juices, and watches her with dark satisfaction as he fucks her with his fingers. When her head begins to thrash against the chair, her cries rising in pitch, he latches on to her swollen nub again, sucking hard.

“Don’t stop,” she gasps, her voice breaking with desperation.

Marek growls in response and redoubles his efforts.

Stella’s release is sudden and explosive. Her back arches as her body trembles uncontrollably, her cries of pleasure echoing through the room. “Marek!”

Marek doesn’t falter, his tongue and fingers following every spasm and contraction, coaxing her through the waves of her climax until they finally subside. When she stills, he pulls back, sitting on his heels, his chest heaving as he wipes his glistening lips with the back of his hand.

“Oh my God, that was unreal,” Stella sighs. She drops her skirts back into place, then settles into the chair. With another contented sigh, she pulls her knees to her chest. Resting her chin on her knees, her heavy-lidded eyes and lazy grin make her the perfect picture of a thoroughly satisfied woman. “You have no idea how badly I needed that.”

“Believe me, I can relate,” Marek says through clenched teeth, his gaze dropping to the cruel cage that punishes his swollen cock.

I don’t bother hiding my amused chuckle. “Come back to me, love.”

Marek obeys instantly, crawling across the floor toward me with a grace that belies the hiss of pain escaping his lips as the cage bites into his rigid flesh. The sight sends a ripple of heat through me, and my cock twitches in anticipation.

When he reaches me, he kneels between my spread legs and clasps his hands behind his back. I let my gaze linger on him for a moment, drinking in the sight of his bronzed skin flushed with effort, his chest still rising and falling as he catches his breath.

Leisurely, I reach down to stroke myself, my thumb smearing the bead of arousal that's pooled at my tip across the dusky crown of my cock. Marek's eyes lock on the movement, his tongue darting out to lick his lips, still glistening with Stella's release.

"Eyes, Marek."

His gaze immediately snaps up to mine.

"Did you enjoy feasting on Stella's cunt as much as I enjoyed watching you feast?"

"Yes, my prince," he replies, his tone steady, though a hint of a grin plays at the corners of his mouth. He's pleased with himself—proud, even—but he keeps it tamped down. He knows better than to gloat openly.

"And how did she taste?" I ask, my balls growing tight at the thought.

"Like honeyed wine." Again, Marek licks his lips. "Sweet and potent."

A growl of satisfaction rumbles low in my throat as I cup his jaw with my free hand. I lean forward and kiss him deeply, my tongue plunging past his lips to claim the last traces of Stella's essence still lingering in his mouth.

"Mmmm..." My voice is a husky drawl against his lips as I pull back. "You're right. A man could get drunk off that taste."

Marek's dark eyes remain locked on mine as I stroke his cheek with my thumb.

"You have pleased me greatly," I continue, dropping into a silky command, "but your job is not yet complete. Make me come using only your mouth. If you can do so in less than a minute, you shall be rewarded."

Determination blazes in his black eyes as I lean back in the chair and feed him my aching cock. Marek wastes no time. His mouth is hot and wet, and his tongue presses firmly along the underside of my shaft as he works me from crown to base, again and again.

His mouth moves with a fervor that leaves me trembling, my grip on the armrest tightening just like Stella's as waves of pleasure roll through me. He sucks harder, his tongue curling expertly around the sensitive head, and I'm undone in half the time.

My release hits with ferocious intensity, and I groan as I spill into him. Marek swallows greedily, his throat working to milk every last drop from me. When I'm spent, he finally pulls back, licking his lips as he looks up at me with a mix of satisfaction and relief.

Panting, I give him a lazy grin. "Always such an overachiever."

"Are you complaining, my prince?" he asks, not bothering to hide his smirk this time.

"Never."

True to my word, I retrieve the tiny key, unlock the chastity cage, and remove it with care.

Marek hisses as his cock springs free, the angry red length already swelling further with need. My fingers trail down his chest before gripping the back of his neck possessively. With my other hand, I reach down and wrap my palm around his cock.

He groans, his forehead dropping to rest on my shoulder as I stroke him slowly.

"I'm proud of you, love," I whisper against his ear. "You suffered so beautifully for me. Let go now, Marek. Come for me. Come for your prince."

It takes only a few strokes before his body tenses, his breath hitching as he shatters in my grasp. His release spills hot and thick over my hand as he lets out a shuddering cry, his entire body trembling with the force of his climax.

His moans taper into soft whimpers as the last waves of pleasure ripple through him. Marek's breaths are uneven, his body pliant as he comes down from the intensity of his orgasm.

I cradle him close, pressing tender kisses to his damp hair. "Good boy," I murmur, brushing a kiss over his temple. "You're perfect, my love."

Satisfied that he's settled, I turn my attention to Stella, whose expression has shifted from blissful satisfaction to a dreamy sort of fatigue. "How are you feeling? Any regrets? Is there anything you need?"

A slow, sleepy grin spreads across her face. "Amazing, none, and nothing I can think of. Except maybe sleep. I don't know if it was the orgasm or interworld travel, but I'm exhausted."

"Probably a bit of both," I say with a chuckle. "Let me clean up, and then Marek and I will return to my palace quarters. You'll have the place to yourself once more."

I rise and head to the water basin to clean myself. The cool water is refreshing against my heated skin, and I wring out a damp cloth and return to Marek. Kneeling before him, I gently clean him with the same care he gives me. His eyes remain closed, his breaths steady as he leans into my touch.

Once finished, I set the cloth aside and head to Marek's room to prepare it for Stella's comfort. I add logs to the hearth and coax them to life until they cast a warm, flickering glow across the room that softens the starkness of the space and makes it feel less like Marek's fortress of solitude. I turn down the sheets and plump the

pillows. Satisfied, I head back to the sitting room to let Stella know it's ready. But the words die on my lips, and my chest squeezes at the sight before me.

Marek is sprawled on the rug in front of the fire, his strong, imposing frame softened in sleep, his face relaxed in a way only I ever see. Beside him, Stella is curled up, her head nestled against his shoulder, her body tucked close to his, the firelight bathing them in a soft, golden glow.

The two of them together tugs at something deep inside me, and an unexpected warmth spreads through my chest. For a moment, I simply stand there, taking in the easy way they've settled together.

When Stella first arrived, I saw her as an opportunity, a means to an end. She was a puzzle piece I could shape and maneuver into place to delay the inevitable, to protect what I share with Marek. I didn't care who she was or how she felt.

But now...now it's different. Somewhere in the days we've shared, she's become more. More than a tool. More than a temporary fix for my problems. I care about her, and not just for what she can do for me or my crown but for who she is.

Smiling to myself, I gather a few blankets and cushions. Moving quietly so as not to disturb them, I settle down on Marek's other side and drape a blanket over all of us before lying back against the warmth of his body.

The fire slowly extinguishes, and shadows claim the room. Stella's soft breaths and Marek's strength cocoon me in comfort. My eyelids grow heavy, and I allow myself to give in to peace, to sleep.

We drift off together, the three of us captured by shadows of something new, something undeniable, and something I'm not yet ready to name.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:48 am

Chapter Six

Stella

Midday sunlight streams through the palace's stained-glass windows as I wander along a secluded corridor, clutching a stolen apple in one hand. The kaleidoscope of colors splashes across the polished floors and walls, shifting with each step I take, as if the Universe Herself is painting me a path.

"She always does this," I mutter, half to myself, half to Her. "Throws me into the deep end of chaos and expects me to figure it out. What kind of divine lesson am I supposed to learn from this?"

The morning has been a blur of exploration and avoidance, slipping between quiet hallways and lush gardens while ensuring I wasn't spotted by anyone important—or anyone at all. The Universe might have dropped me here for a reason, but She hasn't exactly provided a clear manual.

The grounds are breathtaking though. Ornate silver fountains burble in hidden courtyards, and perfectly trimmed hedges and flower beds filled with vibrant purple blooms line cobblestone paths. It's the kind of aesthetic that screams storybook royalty. I hadn't meant to venture so far from Marek's cottage, but curiosity—another one of Her nudges—had gotten the better of me.

"Is this part of the plan?" I ask Her, taking a bite of the apple as I cross an archway that opens into another garden. "Because I could really use a little more clarity right now. A sign would be nice. Or, you know, instructions. Something."

The Universe remains silent, not responding with words, as usual.

With my stomach grumbling and my nerves steadying after dodging a pair of guards, I decide it's time to head back. I told Valen and Marek I wanted some fresh air and time to gather my thoughts, a vague excuse they accepted with varying degrees of skepticism. Marek had insisted on shadowing me at first, but I assured them I wouldn't be seen. Valen finally managed to convince Marek to give me space. They had other pressing matters to attend to, and having a personal bodyguard would only draw attention to me.

Now that I've had my fill of adventuring for the day, at least where avoiding discovery is concerned, the walk back gives me plenty of time to replay yesterday's events in my mind. The market with Valen had been surreal, enough laughter and teasing banter and being trailed by the brooding storm cloud Marek, that I felt like I was in some kind of reality show. Valen had played his role to perfection. Honestly, so had I—maybe too perfectly.

But it's not the market that lingers in my mind. No, it's the cottage. My cheeks heat as memories rush in. Watching Valen and Marek lay bare their own private world of passion and trust had been...electrifying. "And then there was Marek," I say aloud, shaking my head at the thought. A shiver runs through me at the memory, my skin prickling as though his hands are still on my thighs. His mouth had been relentless, and he'd held me still, like he couldn't handle the thought of me slipping away. I hadn't stood a chance.

The Universe stays quiet, but there's a whisper of energy in the air. She's watching, waiting for me to make sense of it all.

I shake the thoughts free as the cottage comes into view, the silver veins running through the stone walls almost glowing in the sunlight. The door is slightly ajar, and I pause just before stepping inside, drawn by the low murmur of voices within.

As I peek around the corner, Valen and Marek lock in a kiss. It's slow and intimate and filled with a tenderness that makes my chest ache. Valen cradles Marek's face in his hands, while Marek fists the front of Valen's shirt.

True love might be the rarest thing in the world, but it's easy to recognize, and the prince and his captain are most definitely in love.

"Is this the point where You remind me finding love is possible?" I mutter under my breath, addressing the Universe once again. "Because I'm not buying it."

After kicking my ex-fiancé to the curb, I've sworn off relationships for good. The only kind of marital engagement I'll ever agree to again is the kind I'm in right now—a fake one. Still, I'd never begrudge anyone else their happiness. Valen and Marek's love isn't mine to question. It's theirs to revel in.

I clear my throat and step inside, leaving the Universe to Her quiet plotting in hopes She doesn't have any more surprises in store.

Valen pulls back first, his smile warm and easy when he sees me. Marek, predictably, is more reserved, though he doesn't outright glower at me, so I'm calling it a win.

"How was your walk?" Valen says.

"Were you seen?" Marek interjects, his brows drawing together as he crosses his arms.

The tension in his tone catches me off guard, though it probably shouldn't. Even after last night, it's clear he doesn't trust me. A tiny pang settles in my chest, but I push it down. Of course he doesn't trust me—I'm a stranger who fell out of the sky and landed in his prince's lap.

“I made sure I wasn’t,” I reply coolly, tilting my chin up just slightly. “I’m not reckless, and I’m certainly not stupid.”

Before the tension can thicken further, Valen cuts in. “I forgot to ask you how you slept. I hope you didn’t wake up with a stiff neck. I didn’t want to disturb you last night.” He looks from me to Marek and back again. “Either of you.”

“No stiff neck here,” I say with a small smile, glad for the shift in focus. “Which is good, because I’m not a fan of anything being stiff on me.”

Marek almost chokes on his coffee, and an amused grin plays at the corners of Valen’s mouth.

“I don’t mean on me,” I stammer, heat rushing to my cheeks. “I mean, I don’t like it when my body parts are stiff. It’s great when yours are, because that’s, you know, useful for you, and it feels good. Holy shit, Stella, stop talking .”

For as long as I can remember, I’ve been good with people. Not just talking to them but really connecting with them, understanding what they need even when they can’t put it into words. It’s why I became a social worker—to help people rebuild their lives when everything around them feels like it’s falling apart.

In my job, words are tools. A well-placed phrase can ease tension in a room, defuse anger, or inspire hope in someone who’s ready to give up. I’ve guided people through impossible situations, coached families through heart-wrenching decisions, and talked countless individuals off metaphorical ledges.

But apparently, put me in a morning-after situation with two ridiculously attractive men I barely know, one brooding and distrustful, the other dangerously charming, and suddenly everything I say sounds like an SNL skit.

I can feel the Universe watching me, and She is loving this. She's probably cackling to Herself, tossing back popcorn as I dig myself a bigger hole.

Honestly, I don't know whether to laugh or cry about it. Probably both.

"Oh my God," I groan, absolutely mortified. "Can we just pretend the last three minutes never happened?"

Marek says "Hell no" at the same time as Valen's chivalrous "Of course." The two share a look, Valen's stern and Marek's unapologetic, which earns a shrug from the captain and an exasperated sigh from the prince.

"Are you hungry?" Valen asks, politely changing the subject and offering me yet another escape from my embarrassment.

"Starving," I admit, grasping for the lifeline.

He gestures to a nearby table where bread, cheese, and fruit are spread out like a still-life painting. "Help yourself."

I make myself a plate and sit down as Valen pours me a generous mug of coffee. It smells strong enough to strip paint but tastes like ambrosia. As I eat, the awkwardness of earlier starts to fade, replaced by that damned curiosity.

"So, Towerfall," I begin, glancing between Valen and Marek, who have settled into their seats at the table. "You're saying this is an actual realm. Like, not just a kingdom or a country but a whole other world?"

"Sort of," Valen replies, leaning back in his chair with an ease that's almost unnerving. "You come from your world..." He holds out his left hand, palm down. "And we are here, in ours," he explains, placing his right hand on top of his left.

“That’s how the elders have talked about it in tales—like the layers of an onion,” Marek adds. “But we don’t have any proof—”

“We do now.” Valen smiles and gives me a wink. “As I was saying, Towerfall is its own realm, divided into four kingdoms: Swords, Cups, Wands, and Pentacles.”

I pause, my mug halfway to my lips. “Wait—Swords, Cups, Wands, and Pentacles? Like the suits of a tarot deck?”

Marek raises a dark brow. “You know of them?”

“Know of them? I’ve been obsessed with tarot since I was a teenager.” I set my mug down with so much excitement, coffee sloshes over the edge. “Each suit represented different energies—Swords for intellect and conflict, Cups for emotion and intuition, Wands for creativity and passion, and Pentacles for material wealth and stability.”

Valen’s lips curl into a small, intrigued smile. “Fascinating. It seems your world mirrors ours in some ways.”

“Mirrors...yes,” I murmur, the thought sending a pulse of electricity down my spine. “Do the people here reflect the traits of the suits? Like, are folks in the Kingdom of Swords all about logic and strategy? Are the people in Cups more...emotional?”

Valen exchanges a look with Marek, who gives a reluctant nod before answering. “There are tendencies, yes. In Swords, we favor intellect and order, but that often comes with its own conflicts. Cups are known for their emotional depth, but that same thing can lead to chaos. Wands are fiery and innovative, always pursuing their ambitions, sometimes recklessly. And Pentacles are grounded, loyal, and resourceful, though they can be overly cautious and greedy.”

My mind races as I soak in the details. “And you two—do you see yourselves as

representations of certain cards? Though there are only seventy-eight cards in a deck, and we saw that many people yesterday alone, so I guess that can't be a thing...can it?"

Marek's jaw tightens, his gaze fixed on me. "If you're asking whether we see ourselves as symbols, I'd say we're more complicated than that. People aren't one thing, no matter how much they might wish to be."

I nod, mulling over his words. He's right, of course. In tarot, cards are tools—snapshots of a moment, not static definitions of a person's identity. But still, it's hard not to wonder.

"It's not totally impossible though. There's a chance that people here could be tied to specific cards." I press. "Not just figuratively but...literally. Like, someone might actually embody the Wheel of Fortune or Death."

Valen tilts his head. "What makes you say that?"

I shrug, though my heart is pounding. "It's just a thought. The connections between this place and the decks I use back home are too strong to ignore. If this realm was somehow...woven into the energy of the cards or vice versa, it makes sense that certain people would connect on a deeper level with one specific card."

Valen leans forward. "And what would you say if I told you that's not just a theory? That there are tales of individuals who are believed to carry the essence of those archetypes?"

I freeze, goose bumps prickling my skin. "I'd say I have a lot more questions."

"You always seem to," Marek grunts.

“You’ll find your answers in time, dear Stella,” Valen says, patting the back of my hand. “Towerfall is vast, and it has more secrets than either of us could ever tell you.”

I absentmindedly grab a hunk of bread and sit back, trying to process everything. If this world really does correlate with the cards I’ve spent my life fascinated by, then the Universe has just thrown me into the ultimate lesson. And for the first time, I wonder if this isn’t just about finding Elara or even getting back home. Maybe instead, I’m here to uncover something far bigger than myself.

“But the good news is our little performance at the market yesterday worked.” Obviously pleased with himself, Valen smiles, plucks a grape from the platter, and pops it into his mouth. “My parents have requested that I bring you to dinner for an introduction.”

I pause midbite, setting down my bread. “Dinner? As in, with the royal family?”

Valen nods. “I was able to talk them out of an engagement ball, but dinner is a must, I’m afraid. They’re eager to meet my future bride and hear the story of our whirlwind engagement.”

His use of the phrase “my future bride” makes my stomach flip, and not in a good way. But I nod. “All right. Let’s do it. What do I need to know to make this believable?”

Valen’s eyes light with approval, as if he hadn’t expected me to move forward so easily. “You’ll need to visit the modiste in town to procure a mix of day dresses and formal evening gowns that are custom to you and not just what Marek was able to locate yesterday. Dinner is tomorrow night. Between all the details you’ve already mastered and the few things Marek and I have left to teach, you’ll have all the knowledge required to present yourself as a charming, if somewhat adorably obscure, subject of the Kingdom of Swords. Once my parents are convinced, it should be

smooth sailing until the wedding day.”

“Wedding day,” I echo, the words landing in my stomach like lead. I take a deep breath and clear my throat. How real is the marriage if it’s in a different realm?

“Right. Smooth sailing. No pressure.”

Valen’s smile is the kind that’s meant to be reassuring. “You’ll do fine. Marek and I will be with you every step of the way.”

I glance at Marek. While Valen is trying to be encouraging, Marek’s silence is anything but. He finally nods curtly, and I’ll take it.

“In the meantime,” Valen continues, “I’ve dispatched my fastest riders to the other three kingdoms to search for signs of Elara’s whereabouts. If they find anything, they’ve been instructed to send word back immediately.”

I blink, the news catching me off guard. “You did that...for me?”

Valen’s grin softens, and for a moment, I see the man beneath the prince, someone who seems to genuinely care. “Of course. You helped me by agreeing to this arrangement, and I made a promise to you as well. It’s only fair I do what I can to help you in return.”

A lump rises in my throat. I know he has no reason to truly care, no obligation to be so considerate. This could all be an act, part of his grand strategy to win me over, but there’s no trace of guile in his tone or expression. Unlike how he acted when I first got here—heavy-handed and mildly manipulative—now his kindness feels genuine.

“Thank you, Valen,” I say, meaning it. “I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

“Please, Stella, helping you find your friend is the least I can do. What you’re doing

for us means more than I can say.”

He reaches over to take Marek’s hand, threading their fingers together. The stoic man’s dark eyes soften as he gazes at his lover, and the quiet affection between them is so palpable it almost makes me look away. But I don’t. I let myself see it. And maybe I let the ice around my heart melt a little too.

“All right, let’s get you to the modiste, shall we?” Valen says, breaking the moment.

I rise from my seat, smoothing my palms over my stomach in a vain attempt to ease the knots of nerves there. Back home, I’m a pro at navigating difficult conversations, at stepping into the chaos of people’s lives and helping them find their footing again.

But deceiving royalty in a strange land? That’s an entirely different kind of challenge. I’m used to helping people confront their realities, not spinning new ones out of thin air. Pretending to be in love with a prince while keeping my story straight is a level of bullshitting I don’t know if I’m cut out for.

Still, what choice do I have? If this is what it takes to find Elara, then I’ll step into the role of Valen’s besotted bride-to-be. And honestly, as far as fake engagements go, I can think of worse things than pretending to be in love with a prince, especially one as disarmingly charming as Valen.

I shield my eyes from the sun as we step outside. A small carriage waits with two gray stallions hitched to it. Nearby, a white mare grazes, her glossy coat and storm-gray saddle almost gleaming in the afternoon light. Marek holds the carriage door open for me, his expression unreadable as ever.

My attention catches on Valen as he swings up onto the mare, settling into the saddle like he was born there.

“Aren’t you coming with us?” I ask, frowning at the sight of him taking a separate mount.

The mare dances beneath him, eager to take off at his command. Valen grins down at me, his blue eyes sparkling with something that can only mean trouble. “Apologies, Lady Stella. Unfortunately, I have other matters that require my attention,” he says, his voice formal and loud enough for the driver to hear. “Enjoy your day with the charming Captain Drayk.”

Charming, my ass.

Before I can retort, Valen gives the mare a gentle nudge, and she takes off in a blur of movement across the meadow. His laughter drifts faintly on the wind, and I swear it’s aimed directly at me.

Marek clears his throat, drawing my attention back to him. “Are you getting in, or shall we chase after him?” he asks dryly.

I huff out a breath and climb into the carriage. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:48 am

Chapter Seven

Marek

I sit stiffly in the chair near the wall, my boots planted firmly on the polished wooden floor of the modiste's shop. The room is an assault on the senses, an explosion of pastels and finery, bolts of fabric draped across every available surface. The air is thick with the scent of lavender, and the soft hum of voices creates a cloying atmosphere I can barely tolerate.

Stella, on the other hand, seems utterly at ease. She stands on a small dais, arms outstretched as the modiste measures her waist, her bust, the length of her arms. Assistants flit around her like sparrows, chattering about the cut and drape of each proposed gown.

To my frustration, she fits in here too easily. She responds to their suggestions with a quick wit and an easy smile, earning laughter from the younger women as if she's known them all her life. Even her foreign accent, sharp and unplaceable, only seems to draw more attention.

I force my gaze to the window, where sunlight filters through frosted glass, softening the harsh edges of my mood. But my eyes betray me, sliding back to her. She's captivating in her way, but not for the reasons Valen seems to think. There's something calculated about her ease, something too polished in the way she carries herself.

She jokes with the women as if she's enjoying herself, but I don't miss the way her

eyes occasionally dart to the mirrors surrounding her. She's not looking at the fabric or the fit of the gowns—they're glances of assessment, checking to see if she's convincing enough.

That practiced confidence grates on me. Or maybe it's the way Valen so readily accepts her at face value, as though she's some gift from the gods sent to solve all his problems. He always assumes the best in people, but I know better.

Betrayal isn't a matter of if—it's when. I learned that lesson the hard way. Trusting someone so deeply, only to have them rip the ground out from underfoot, changes a man. It wasn't their fall that shattered me—it was mine.

Since then, I've never made the mistake of trusting too easily. Stella, with her quick smiles and borrowed confidence, won't be the exception. I'll do my duty, protect Valen, and see this charade through, but I won't let my guard down. Not for her. Not for anyone.

And yet.

Stella catches my reflection in one of the mirrors and quirks a brow, as if sensing my scrutiny. She gives me a small, knowing smile—one that's both infuriating and undeniably magnetic. Damn her.

It's impossible to ignore how the sunlight catches her dark auburn curls, setting them aglow like embers in a dying fire. The way the curve of her neck seems to invite a man's lips. My eyes travel lower, drawn to the gentle swell of her collarbone, the way it disappears into the modest neckline of her dress.

I clench my fists on my thighs, the leather of my gloves creaking under the pressure, and force myself to look away.

But the memory of last night is relentless. The way her body quivered under my mouth, the way her soft moans broke the stillness of the room and drove me to the edge of control. The taste of her was raw and addictive...dangerous. A fire I couldn't help but feed, even knowing it might burn me alive.

My pulse quickens despite my best efforts to keep it under control. I shift uncomfortably in my seat, glancing at the modiste's assistants bustling past with armfuls of lace and ribbons. No one seems to notice my tension, but if Stella so much as glances my way, she'll see right through me.

I grit my teeth and fix my gaze anywhere else. On anything but her.

And yet my eyes find her again.

Stella laughs at some comment the modiste makes, her head tipping back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. It's a sound that carries across the room, and it tugs at something deep inside me.

She leans slightly to the side as the modiste gestures to a bolt of fabric, and the sway of her hips is subtle but hypnotic. Stella's hands move as she explains something, and I can't help but imagine them touching me with the same energy she brought to every moan, every movement last night.

And her lips. Gods save me, those lips. Full and soft, the kind that could make a man forget every vow he's ever made. I've kissed those lips in my mind a hundred times since last night, felt their imagined press against my own.

I shift again, the ache in my body becoming harder to ignore. I know I should hate this—this pull she has on me, this hunger that's as unwelcome as it is undeniable. But I don't.

A part of me craves her.

It's an uncomfortable truth, one that gnaws at me as I sit there in the pastel hell of this shop. I crave her laughter, her fire, the way she makes every room she steps into feel just a little brighter, a little warmer. And worst of all, I crave the way she makes me feel—like a predator, like she's daring me to take control, to dominate, to show her who holds the power.

And, damn her, I want to.

The modiste's assistants dart glances at me as they work, their movements growing less focused as their curiosity overtakes their discretion.

"Captain Drayk," one finally ventures. She's a petite woman with honey-blond hair pinned back in an elaborate twist. "How long have you served in the prince's guard?"

I meet her gaze briefly, keeping my expression neutral. "Long enough."

Her eyes widen slightly at my clipped tone, but she doesn't back down. "It must be fascinating, traveling with the prince and protecting him. Do you enjoy your work?"

I glance at Stella, who's chatting animatedly with another assistant about the drape of the gown she's wearing. Her easy laughter fills the room, but her eyes dart to the mirror, and I catch the faint sign of awareness as she monitors my interaction.

"My work is not for enjoyment," I say flatly.

The assistant falters for a moment before recovering, her tone turning teasing. "Do you always talk this much, or is today a rare exception?"

Another assistant nearby giggles, emboldened by her colleague's attempt at banter.

“Only when necessary,” I reply.

For all their chattering, my focus remains steadfastly on Stella—or, more precisely, on ensuring she doesn’t say or do anything to betray Valen’s trust.

The modiste, however, seems less inclined to let me sit quietly. She addresses me directly, her tone teasing but perceptive. “Captain, your mood doesn’t seem to match the joyous occasion of the prince’s betrothal. Shouldn’t you be celebrating?”

Before I can answer, Stella interjects. “Oh, he’s celebrating in his own way,” she says, flashing a smile that instantly eases the tension in the room. “Captain Drayk simply takes his role as the prince’s protector very seriously. He doesn’t yet trust me, and I can’t blame him. This whole courtship has been a bit of a whirlwind, to say the least.”

Her words catch me off guard, and I glance at her sharply. The warmth in her voice feels genuine, as though she’s truly trying to defend me rather than mock me. It’s disarming, and I find myself watching her more closely, searching for any signs of duplicity. But if they’re there, I can’t find them, which means she’s either sincere or a masterful liar.

Before the modiste can press further, one of the assistants whispers something in her ear. She excuses herself and her assistants, explaining that a client requires their attention out front. Her absence leaves Stella standing on the dais, laced into an elaborate gown of pale purple silk.

I allow myself a moment to take her in. The dress clings to her figure in all the right places, the soft fabric catching the light and making her skin glow. She’s a vision, and for a fleeting second, I understand why Valen is so charmed by her.

Stella tilts her head, catching me watching her. “What?” she asks, a teasing lilt to her

voice. “Do I have something on my face?”

I bristle, my jaw tightening. “You look...fine,” I say, aiming for disinterest.

But she smirks, and the glint in her eyes tells me I’ve failed miserably. “Relax, Marek. You don’t always have to look like you’re planning a siege.”

I snort softly, more at her audacity than what she’s said, and shift my focus to the bolts of fabric scattered around the room. But even as I try to dismiss her, everything about her sticks with me.

“Well,” she says, breaking the silence, “unless you’d like me to parade through town like this, I’m going to need some help.”

I narrow my eyes. “I hardly think that’s appropriate.”

Her lips curve into a faint smirk. “More inappropriate than where your mouth was last night?”

Her words land like a punch, knocking the air from my lungs and ratcheting up the tension coiling in my body. My gaze sharpens on her, and she holds it.

Before I can think better of it, my feet carry me forward.

She steps behind the privacy screen, and I follow, stopping just short of invading her space. Stella turns her back to me, exposing the row of tiny buttons that runs the length of her spine. Being this close, close enough to touch, sends a fresh wave of heat coursing through me. My throat tightens, and my fingers move to the first button.

I work carefully, undoing each button gently, my fingers brushing against the smooth

fabric of her dress and the warmth of her skin beneath. Each release of the silk feels like a small, torturous victory, the material parting inch by inch.

My hands falter for the briefest moment as her delicate satin corset comes into view, its intricate lacing emphasizing the curve of her waist. My pulse quickens, a steady drumbeat in my ears that drowns out everything but the sound of our shared breaths and the soft rustle of fabric.

Her scent surrounds me, a warm blend of citrus and something floral, delicate yet intoxicating. It clings to the air between us and wraps around me like a wish. My chest tightens, my thoughts scattering, unable to hold on to anything but the nearness of her.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” she says, her voice soft but steady. “You don’t trust that I won’t do something to harm Valen.”

I pause, my fingers lingering on the next button. “I don’t trust that you won’t demand more from him than what you claim to want in return for your help.”

“Is there something about me specifically you don’t trust?” She turns her head slightly, her profile illuminated by the sunlight filtering through the curtains. “Or is it just women in general?”

Her question penetrates my defenses like a blade between armor. How is she able to see through me so easily?

Frustration flares, and I quickly finish unbuttoning her dress. The silk falls away, and I step back and hand her the dress she came in.

“Hurry up,” I say gruffly, avoiding her gaze. “I have better things to do today than escort you on errands, sorceress.”

As I retreat to the front of the store, my body pulses with a mix of annoyance and something far more dangerous. Stella has a way of stirring emotions I've worked years to suppress, and I'm not sure if that makes her an ally or a threat.

Out front, I settle the bill with the modiste and arrange for the gowns to be picked up later. Delivery to my cottage is out of the question—too many prying eyes. Stella joins me a moment later, her expression carefully neutral, though I can sense a tension she's hiding. Without a word, I escort her to the carriage and hold the door for her as she climbs in.

Once we're settled inside, her on the bench across from me, she breaks the silence. "I'm sorry if I overstepped earlier. I can be a little blunt. I shouldn't have said that you have a problem with women."

I wasn't expecting an apology. For the first time since she fell from the heavens, I feel the slightest bit of doubt in my own judgment of her. My instincts tell me to remain guarded, to keep her at arm's length. But a quieter voice, one I've long ignored, suggests that maybe she's not the threat I've made her out to be.

Minutes pass in silence before I decide to speak. "I've seen betrayal before," I begin, my gaze fixed on the passing scenery. "When I was young, I married a woman who'd come to town fleeing an abusive lover. She seemed fragile, desperate, and I fell for her quickly—too quickly. Despite Valen's warnings, I wed her within a week." I pause, the memory still bitter. "For three months, everything was perfect. Then she disappeared—along with my life savings. Turns out she and her lover had been running a grift. I was just one of many marks. She broke my trust, my heart, and very nearly my spirit. It was Valen who pulled me back from the edge."

Stella's gaze softens. "That's when your relationship with Valen changed, isn't it?"

I nod, exhaling slowly. "He showed me what love should look like—honest, steady,

real. Looking back, what I felt for her wasn't love. It was infatuation, a naive obsession. In the end, my heart and savings recovered. My trust, however, did not."

She clasps her hands tightly in her lap and is quiet for a moment "I get it. I recently had my heart and trust broken too." Her gaze drops to her hands. "My ex-fiancé had been having an affair with my neighbor for the entire last year we were together. We were weeks away from getting married when I found out. It felt like my whole world shattered. Elara, she was my rock through it all. She means everything to me."

Her eyes lift to meet mine, and for a fleeting second, I see something true, something real. It's enough to make my chest tighten, though I can't quite place why. "Did your relationship with her change as well? The way Valen and mine has grown?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. I love Elara like a sister," she says with a soft smile. "Plus, I've sworn off relationships completely. No more romantic entanglements for me."

Her honesty feels like the first rays of sunlight breaking after a storm, warming a place in my chest I hadn't realized had grown cold. There's a kinship there, a shared disillusionment with the promises of love, and it chips away at the wall I've had up since the moment she arrived in Towerfall. But with that wall cracking, the unspoken tension between us shifts into far more treacherous territory, one I've been fighting to ignore.

"And how do you feel about entanglements of a more...carnal and...temporary nature?" I ask, my voice dipping low, deliberately weighted.

Her breaths quicken, her pupils dilating as she holds my gaze. The air between us thickens, and I watch the way she crosses her legs beneath her skirts, her teeth grazing her bottom lip before she answers. "I would be open to those. Very open."

The corners of my mouth lift, a slow smile as heat rushes through me. I lean back in

my seat, letting the moment hang between us as I savor her response.

Thoughts of how to approach Valen flash through my mind, though I suspect the bastard already anticipated this. He knew what he was doing when he sent me into town alone with Stella. And I can't say I'm upset with the end result.

I fold my hands in my lap and allow my deviant imagination to surge to life—her beneath me, her body arching, her soft moans filling the air.

It's only a matter of time.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:48 am

Chapter Eight

Stella

I shift uncomfortably in my seat as the carriage sways gently over the cobblestone road. The amethyst gown I'm wearing is undeniably beautiful, its silk fabric flowing over my curves like water. The bodice is decorated with delicate silver embroidery that forms jagged patterns reminiscent of frost fractals on a winter morning. The sheer, weightless sleeves cascade down my arms and flare softly at my wrists, and a small train spills onto the seat beside me, the hem catching glimmers of light from the softly swaying lamp inside the carriage.

It's a gown fit for a princess-to-be, which only makes me feel like more of an imposter. My chest is tight, and I can't shake the thought of Elara. I keep telling myself she's safe somewhere, but uncertainty gnaws at me.

When Valen came to the cottage for breakfast this morning, he mentioned he hadn't yet received any messages from his riders. I'd hoped to hear some news by now, but I knew going into this that it could take weeks. Still, hope is lodged heavily in my chest.

I smooth the fabric over my knees and glance at Marek. He's sitting beside me, his strong thigh pressing against mine. The contact is subtle but solid, a quiet reminder that I'm not entirely alone. He looks every bit the captain of the guard dressed in his uniform—a tailored coat of deep, regal purple, trimmed in burnished silver.

“You'll be fine, sorceress ,” he says, cutting through the swirl of my thoughts. The

word that began as an accusation, laced with suspicion and distance, has softened into something close to affection. Marek shifts slightly, leaning so close his shoulder brushes mine. “You bewitch everyone you meet. The royal family will be no different.”

I take a deep breath and try to will myself to embody his same unwavering confidence. “I hope so. I’ve been in enough emotional and stressful situations that I should be able to handle myself, but this...” My gesture takes in the general opulence of the carriage. “This is different.”

Marek’s lips twitch, almost imperceptibly. “We’ve practiced your backstory and answers to every possible question. You could recite them in your sleep by now. If this reckless plan fails, it won’t be due to your performance.”

“If Valen and I don’t pull this off...” I stop myself, unable to voice the potential consequences. Instead, I clasp my hands in my lap and stare down at the silver embroidery on my bodice as it catches the light. “I don’t want to let you guys down.”

“Stella...” His voice softens in a way I don’t expect, drawing my gaze to his. “Regardless of how this dinner turns out, I promise you won’t have let us down.”

His words pull at my heart, the place I’ve carefully kept locked away. I hold his gaze longer than I should, and the air between us shifts. It’s heavy, charged, much like it had been days ago at the modiste shop. My eyes fall to his mouth, tracing the curve of his lips before darting back up to meet his smoldering gaze. He’s magnetic, drawing me closer without either of us moving.

My pulse quickens, heat coiling low in my belly as I imagine what it might feel like to close the distance, to let go of the restraint that’s been holding us both in place. Because since the modiste shop, there’s been nothing. Nothing at all. Not one word or touch or indication that Marek or even Valen might act on the tension simmering

beneath the surface.

And the tension is there, so thick I could choke on it.

I'd expected Valen to act, to orchestrate another scenario like he had that night we'd gone to town, something deliciously intoxicating that would obliterate the space between us. Instead, both men have kept a polite distance. A polite, proper, absolutely maddening distance despite the lingering glances that leave me wishing I'd tumbled into Towerfall while holding my vibrator.

"I appreciate that, Captain," I say finally. "But I'm going to do everything I can to make sure at least one of us gets our fairy-tale ending."

The carriage slows as we approach the palace's front steps. Through the window, I catch sight of Valen waiting for us. He's a vision dressed in his official attire. His jacket is a striking white with silver embellishments that catch the light like frost on a winter morning. A deep purple sash crosses his broad chest, and his regal, composed demeanor is offset by the warmth in his smile as his eyes meet mine.

The carriage rocks to a stop, and Marek steps out first, his boots striking the cobblestones with a thud. He turns and extends a hand to me. I place mine in his, and the strength of his grip sends a pulse of steadiness through me as I step down onto the pathway.

Valen approaches, his expression shifting to something unreadable as his gaze flickers between Marek and me. "You look stunning." He offers his arm. "Shall we?"

I glance up at Marek, whose features are back to their usual impenetrable mask. But there's something in his eyes ...pride, maybe? Whatever it is, it gives me confidence.

Looping my arm through Valen's, I nod. "Let's go charm the royal family."

Together, we ascend the wide stone steps of the palace, the grandeur of the building looming above us. It's a fortress of silver and burnished steel with black stone accents that break up the shimmering facade. Purple banners hang from high parapets, their edges embroidered with silver. Sharp, angular stained-glass windows refract light into jagged rainbows that spill across the dark stone steps.

"Just be yourself," Valen murmurs as we near the towering entrance. "They'll see what I see—an extraordinary woman any man would want as his wife."

With the disastrous end to my real engagement lingering like a bruise, the compliment only tightens my stomach. I doubt Marek has shared that story with him. If Valen knew, he'd understand just how hollow his sentiment rings. Still, I force a smile and square my shoulders, steeling myself to give the performance of a lifetime.

The marble corridors of the palace are vast and echo with the soft tap of my slippers against the floor. Silver veins run through the stones beneath my feet and gleam under the soft glow of sconces shaped like swords, their blades crossed and crowned with candles. Stained-glass panels filter the light into muted purples and blues, and gilded mirrors line the walls.

Valen's hand remains lightly over mine, which rests in the crook of his elbow. His arm is as tense as a bowstring, the only sign that he shares my worries, as he leads me through the labyrinth of opulence.

Finally, we stop in front of a pair of massive double doors, each carved with an ornate coat of arms and inlaid with silver. My breath sputters in my throat as I realize what's beyond them—the dining hall where the king and queen of the Kingdom of Swords are waiting.

"Ready?" Valen asks, his blue eyes searching mine. His expression is calm, but the faint lines of tension around his mouth and the stiffness of his muscles betray him.

For all his confidence, I see the truth: he's just as nervous as I am. Perhaps even more so. After all, his future—and Marek's—hangs in the balance.

Despite my new identity as a love Grinch, I genuinely want to help Valen and Marek. Their love is rare. It's the kind of bond that makes people believe in something bigger than themselves, and I'm determined to do everything I can to make sure they come out of this with the freedom to ride off into the sunset together. Advocating for people caught in impossible situations, navigating emotions, building trust—this is what I do. And this situation is no different.

With that in mind, I pull my shoulders back and grin up at him. "I'm ready."

"If I forget to say it later, thank you for this, Stella." He lifts his hand and brushes a stray curl from my face, the gesture so tender it momentarily stills the frantic beat of my heart.

"You're welcome, Valen."

He takes a deep breath, steadying himself. Then, with a regal sweep of his arm, he calls for the doors to open, and the crown prince of the Kingdom of Swords leads me into the first dinner of the rest of my life.

Chapter Nine

Valen

The dining hall's burnished silver walls catch the flickering glow of the candelabras that line the room. The stained-glass windows I've always admired fracture the waning sunlight into fragmented patterns that play across the long table like shards of glass. The harshness of the space is softened only by the deep purple drapes and the matching table runner, which seems to stretch endlessly and is laden with enough platters of food to satisfy an army.

At the head of the table, my father, King Orvyn Greymourn, sits like a statue carved from the same burnished silver that adorns the palace. His broad shoulders and commanding presence are tempered only by his hair, now more white than blond, a constant reminder that time is catching up with him. No doubt that's why he's forcing my hand. He wants to ensure the future of his kingdom. Beside him sits my mother, Queen Vynestra Greymourn, her emerald-green eyes cutting through every word and movement like finely honed blades. I inherited her warm, inviting smile, though hers has been perfected by years of courtly maneuvering. Lance, my sixteen-year-old brother, lounges on our mother's right, clearly less interested in diplomacy and more focused on demolishing a plate of roasted pheasant.

I'm seated to the left of my father with Stella at my side. Her gown catches the light and makes her look every bit the regal fiancée I've promised my parents she is.

My father clears his throat, breaking the polite hum of conversation like the strike of a gavel. "Stella," he begins, his voice steady and measured, the same tone that

reverberates through court sessions. “Valen tells us you met under rather extraordinary circumstances.”

My stomach tightens. I force myself to focus on my wine, swirling it as if the motion could settle my nerves. Stella, however, doesn’t falter.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” she says. “We met at a festival in the northern provinces, where I’m from. Valen quite literally saved me from being trampled by an overzealous crowd during the celebrations.”

My mother’s long hair slides from her shoulders as she tilts her head, her smile widening. “How chivalrous of you, Valen.”

“It was nothing,” I mutter, though my cheeks burn under the attention.

Stella catches my eye. “You’re being modest. You were very heroic.” She flashes me a conspiratorial grin and turns back to my parents. “He insisted on ensuring I was safe, and we ended up spending the rest of the evening together. We walked through town and talked for hours before we stopped to sit and gaze at the stars. Before we knew it, the sun began to rise.” She places her hand over mine on the table and stares into my eyes like I’m the only man she’s ever known, ever wanted. “As Valen walked me back home, I knew then that I’d already fallen for him.”

The room blurs—my parents’ watchful gazes, Lance’s curious smirk—all of it fades into insignificance. All I can see is Stella. Her gaze is so genuine, her smile so achingly sincere. She’s so good at this charade that even I almost believe her.

And for one treacherous second, I let myself wonder—what if it weren’t a lie? What if her words were true? What if I was the object of her affection—her laughter, her trust, her love? The possibility unfurls in my chest like a banner in the wind before I can force it back into the shadows where it belongs.

Her hand is warm, her delicate fingers resting lightly against mine, holding me steady while simultaneously upending my balance. My skin prickles under the weight of her nearness. My heart leaps and squeezes, races and slows with how much I want to believe her.

My thumb smooths over hers, an involuntary motion, and the tenderness in her gaze deepens. She's honeyed whiskey, my favorite drink, and all I want is to get drunk.

I clear my throat, breaking the spell before it can pull me under completely. A small, calculated smile curves my lips, a careful mix of sheepishness and charm. I squeeze her hand, a silent acknowledgment of her skill and a reminder to myself of what's at stake.

For better or worse, she's convincing everyone in this room of our love. Including me.

My mother's gaze softens. "It seems fate has brought you together."

"Perhaps it has," Stella agrees.

"And your family?" my father asks. "We were disappointed when we learned they wouldn't be in attendance. What are their thoughts on the engagement?"

A shadow passes over Stella's face. "Unfortunately, Your Majesty, my parents died when I was young, and I'm an only child." Her voice is brittle, and she clears her throat. This time, when I squeeze her hand, it's because I know she's telling the truth. "But if they could meet Valen, I know they would love him. My father liked to call me 'his little princess.' Wherever he is, he's surely gloating that he knew my fate all along."

Her smile is bittersweet, the ache of her loss woven so deeply into her expression that

it silences the room. Even Lance pauses midchew. Before I can overthink it, I wrap my arm around Stella's shoulders and press a kiss to her temple. The gesture is impulsive, surprising us both, but it feels natural, the most honest thing I've done all evening.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide with emotion I can't quite place, before her lips tip into a radiant smile that banishes the momentary heaviness.

Across the table, my mother exchanges a glance with my father, their approval palpable even without words.

Lance, ever the opportunist, seizes the moment. "So, Stella, what's it like being engaged to my brother? Is he as boring as he seems?"

"Lance Greymourn, don't disparage your brother," my mother scolds through her grin.

Stella's laugh is bells ringing, and it hits me how easily she's charmed my family. How easily she's charmed me.

"Not at all. He's kind, brave, and far too smart for his own good. And he has a wicked sense of humor," she adds, winking at my besotted little brother. "Though I suspect he saves most of it for you."

"And what of your future plans, Stella?" my father asks, steering the conversation back to business. "Have you considered what it means to be part of the royal family? The responsibilities that come with it?"

Stella nods, her expression sobering. "I have, Your Majesty. It's not something I take lightly. I've seen how much Valen loves his people and how deeply he cares for this kingdom. I may not have been born with royal blood, but I'll do everything in my

power to support him and serve Swords.”

“And the matter of heirs?” my mother asks. “The continuation of our line is vital. Have you thought about what it means to raise a family in service to the crown?”

“I understand the importance of ensuring the future of the Greymourn legacy, yes. I believe I would embrace motherhood wholeheartedly. If we were to have children—”

“When,” my mother interjects. “When you and the crown prince have children.”

Stella swallows, and her shoulders stiffen. “My children will be good people, Your Majesty. They will be brave and compassionate and unapologetically themselves. Who better to serve the crown than humans who value other humans?”

The room stills. Even my father’s sharp gaze softens, though he hides it well behind a thoughtful expression. My mother studies Stella for a moment longer, her green eyes glittering.

“You have a unique perspective,” my mother finally says. “It’s not what I expected to hear, but perhaps that’s precisely what makes it worth listening to. That will serve you well in the years to come.”

My father nods. “Valen, I think I can also speak for the queen when I say you’ve chosen well. I feel this is a good match, and we’re pleased to welcome you into our family, Stella.”

Mother’s eyes glisten with unshed tears, her usual steely demeanor melting as she looks between us. “Yes, my dear, we are very much looking forward to your wedding next week.”

Stella beams, her gratitude so effortless it feels real. She thanks them graciously as I

marvel at her composure. She's pulled this off flawlessly, so why does the weight of our deception sit heavily in my chest?

They didn't merely accept our story—they accepted her. They see her as one of us now, someone they trust not just to stand beside me but to carry on our family's legacy. The thought of breaking that illusion, of watching their faces when I tell them my dear lady wife has met with an untimely end, turns my stomach sour. Spending these past days with Stella, I've seen firsthand how magnetic she is, how easily she draws people into her orbit. I shouldn't be surprised my parents aren't immune, but somehow, I am.

My mother wipes the corner of her eye with a silk handkerchief, the rare sight of her misty gaze further twisting my gut. "Welcome to the family, Stella."

My breath catches in my chest, and I can't help but think: What have I done?

* * *

Stella exhales a long, slow breath, her posture finally easing as the tension of the evening ebbs away. She leans back against the plush seat, her hands resting loosely in her lap as the carriage gently sways along the path back to the cottage.

"You were incredible tonight," I tell her, breaking the quiet that's settled between us. "My parents, Lance—they were utterly taken with you."

She offers me a small smile, the exhaustion etched into her features tempered by a flicker of pride. "I'm just glad it's over. I didn't realize how exhausting it is to pretend to be someone else."

I study her, my gaze lingering on the tight coils of her hair as they glint in the dim lantern light, the curve of her lips as they quirk into that faint, weary smile. Marek's

words from the other day rise unbidden in my mind. “She’s open to...temporary entanglements. Carnal ones.” He’d said it casually, but I’d caught the glint in his eye that told me he was serious.

And I’ve noticed it too—the way Stella’s gaze lingers on me or Marek when she thinks we’re not looking. There’s a hunger there, subtle but unmistakable. It’s a pull I’ve felt as well, despite my best efforts to ignore it. Knowing Marek has warmed to her only adds fuel to the fire. He’s made it clear he’d be open to exploring what’s brewing between the three of us, though he’s left the decision in my hands.

But I’ve held back. The situation is delicate and messy enough already. But sitting here now, watching her in the muted glow of the lantern, it’s getting harder to remember my conviction. The soft light casts shadows over the hollow of her throat, the gentle curve of her breasts. Her very presence stirs something in me that’s becoming harder to ignore with each passing moment.

Temptation coils low in my stomach, an ache that’s been building steadily since the night she arrived. I clench my fists in a futile attempt to keep my thoughts in check. What would it hurt, really? To give in, to indulge in the connection that’s already thrumming between the three of us?

When the carriage stops, I step out first, extending a hand to Stella. She hesitates only briefly before placing her warm, soft fingers in mine, allowing me to help her down. We walk to the door in silence, but before she can open it, I reach into my coat pocket and pull out an envelope.

“This arrived just before dinner,” I say, holding it up. “From one of my riders.”

She takes it, her fingers trembling slightly as she breaks the seal and unfolds the parchment. I step closer, leaning in to read over her shoulder. The words are simple but electrifying. A woman matching Elara’s description has been seen in the

Kingdom of Pentacles. We will reach the kingdom by morning and will report back any findings.

Her breath hitches, her hands clutching the letter tightly. When she turns to me, her eyes are bright with hope. “This could be it,” she whispers, a radiant smile breaking across her face.

Before I can respond, she rises onto her toes and presses her lips to mine. The kiss is soft but urgent, her hope pouring into me.

The kiss is over almost as quickly as it began. She pulls back, her doe brown eyes wide. “Oh my God,” she stammers, her cheeks flushing a deep crimson. “I—I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Apology not accepted,” I growl, my fragile restraint snapping as I crush my mouth to hers. Her lips part beneath mine, her hands fisting in the fabric of my jacket as every ounce of my pent-up desire rushes into the kiss and I lose myself in her taste.

The cottage door creaking open jolts us apart. Marek stands in the doorway, arms crossed, his expression unreadable.

“Well,” he says flatly. “This is disappointing.”

Stella’s blush deepens, her lips still swollen from our kiss. “Shit. Marek, I—”

Before she can finish, Marek strides forward, closing the distance between them in two long steps. He grabs her waist, pulling her flush against him, and silences her with a kiss that’s every bit as commanding as it is unexpected. Stella’s fingers clutch his sleeves as he takes his time, proving his point.

When Marek finally pulls back, she looks dazed, her lips parted and her eyes slightly

unfocused.

He smirks, his voice a low rumble. “Next time,” he says, his gaze mine, “don’t start without me.”

Behind them, I grin, the last shreds of my resolve crumbling into dust. “Noted,” I reply, shoving them inside and kicking the door shut behind me. Screw my convictions. Life is messy, and I’ve never been afraid to get dirty.

Chapter Ten

Stella

“Next time?” I repeat, my voice breaking. “How many times will there be?”

Not exactly the sexiest response, but I don’t think anyone could blame me. I’m giving myself a pass considering I was just thoroughly kissed by both of the men I’ve been fantasizing about since I accidentally spied on them from the study. There’s a sudden lack of blood flow to my brain for reasons .

“Many,” Marek answers, his voice dripping with promise before his mouth is on mine again, demanding and possessive.

This is really happening.

The moment Marek’s lips leave mine, Valen takes over, spinning me around to face him. His hands settle on my waist, grounding me while his blue eyes burn into mine like twin storms. My chest rises and falls in quick, uneven breaths, the lingering heat from Marek’s kiss merging with the raw energy radiating from Valen.

He doesn’t give me time to think, doesn’t let me catch my breath before his lips crash into mine. Valen’s kiss is fierce, consuming, overwhelming. His tongue sweeps against mine in a rhythm that has my knees threatening to buckle. The faint taste of wine lingers on his lips, mingling with the scent of leather and something uniquely him.

His hand slides up my back, fingers threading into my hair, holding me firmly in place. The other trails down to my hip, his touch burning, branding. The low growl that rumbles in his chest reverberates through me, igniting a fire that threatens to consume me entirely.

Behind me, I'm acutely aware of Marek's presence. He doesn't touch me, but his heat is a steady force, anchoring me even as Valen's kiss leaves me untethered. The rustle of fabric draws my attention, and when Valen pulls back just enough to let me gasp for air, I glance over my shoulder. Marek stands there, his shirt discarded on the floor, his muscular chest gleaming in the soft glow of the firelight. His dark eyes meet mine, smoldering with intent, and a wicked smile curves his lips.

"Don't stop now," Marek drawls, his voice rough. "I'm enjoying the show."

Valen huffs a low laugh, the sound like velvet brushing over steel, and his thumb caresses my cheek. "Patience has never been my strong suit," he admits. "And we should stop until I hear her say she wants this. Before we go any further, Stella, the choice must be yours."

Marek moves closer, his heat radiating against my back. "Tell him you want this, Stella. Tell him you want us."

My gaze darts between them, my pulse pounding in my ears. The weight of their attention is intoxicating, and the heat pooling low in my belly leaves no room for doubt. My lips part, and my voice trembles with a mixture of anticipation and desire. "I want this." I look back at Marek, then forward to Valen. "I want both of you."

Valen's lips curl into a smile that sends a shiver racing through me. "Then tonight, you are ours."

The declaration wraps around me like a silken leash.

He leans down and brushes his lips against mine in a kiss that feels more like a promise before stepping back. “Marek, be a good boy, and help our pet out of her dress.”

Marek is behind me in an instant, his callused hands finding the small buttons running down the back of my gown. The brush of his fingers against my skin is a spark that ignites a line of fire down my spine. Valen steps to the side, his piercing gaze fixed on me, watching every movement as though committing it to memory.

The dress slips from my shoulders and pools around my feet in a cascade of silk. Marek’s hands linger at my waist, his thumbs brushing soft circles over the bare skin at the edge of my corset. “Beautiful,” he says, his breath tickling the nape of my neck.

Valen moves closer, his fingers ghosting along my collarbone, then trailing down the center of my corset with agonizing slowness. His touch sends a fresh wave of heat through me as his lips curve into a wicked grin. “Let’s see what other treasures you’re hiding from us.”

Marek takes the cue, his hands deftly unlacing the corset. The pressure around my ribs eases, and with a final tug, the garment joins my dress on the floor. The cool air kisses my bare breasts, drawing my nipples into tight, sensitive buds. Valen’s eyes roam over me, darkened with unbridled lust, and Marek’s sharp intake of breath behind me only fuels the fire burning in my core.

Valen steps even closer and tilts my chin until I’m forced to meet his gaze. “You are a vision, Stella. I wonder how wet you are for us.” His voice is a low purr that vibrates through my entire body. “Marek.”

The captain’s hand slides down my spine, his fingertips a trail of heat that leaves me trembling. His lips brush the shell of my ear, and I can’t suppress the soft sigh that escapes me. Marek’s touch continues lower, tracing the curve of my ass before

pressing between my thighs.

My breath catches as his fingers part my pussy lips, spreading my arousal, teasing my entrance but never giving me the satisfaction of breaching.

Valen's grip on my chin tightens slightly, drawing my gaze back to his. His blue eyes burn with possession, and the intensity in his expression steals what little breath I have left. "Always so eager," he says, his voice like silk and steel.

When Marek pulls away, a small whimper of protest escapes me, but it's quickly cut short as his hand appears in my line of sight. His forefinger glistens with my juices, the evidence of my need.

Valen's gaze locks with Marek's, and I watch, spellbound, as Valen leans forward and captures Marek's finger in his mouth. His cheeks hollow as he sucks it clean. The sight makes my skin flush, and my knees threaten to give out beneath me.

"Fucking exquisite," Valen rasps. "My turn."

His hands find me next, one bracing my waist, the other sliding between my legs. Valen doesn't waste his time teasing. In the span of a heartbeat, he sinks two fingers deep inside me, his palm grinding against my clit with perfect pressure. The sensation rips a gasp from my throat, and my head falls back against Marek's broad shoulder as he thrusts. Heat builds within me, each stroke pushing me further into a haze of longing.

Valen's gaze fixes on mine, an unrelenting storm of intensity that sees every hint of desire, every tremor of anticipation. His lips slide into a devilish smile as my moans fill the air. "Oh God, that feels so good," I gasp. "More. Please, more."

"Marek," Valen commands, "you heard our pet."

Before I can process what he means, Marek's hand returns. This time, there's no hesitation. I gasp as two more fingers join Valen's and begin moving in tandem, their rhythm perfectly matched as they fuck me with their fingers, their eyes, their whispered praise.

My hips rock instinctively, chasing the promise of release as I mutter a string of nonsensical syllables and claw at Valen's shoulders.

"That's it, pet," my princely devil croons. "Now, imagine if these were our cocks. Both of us pressing inside your slick cunt, stretching you, filling you so completely you don't know where you end and we begin."

Behind me, Marek curses. "The idea alone has me ready to blow."

"Fuck," I whisper on a shuddered exhale, the image almost sending me over the edge. But beneath the haze of desire is a flash of nerves. "Is that what..."

Valen smirks. "No, not tonight. We won't cast you into deep waters without first ensuring you can swim."

Without warning, both men pull their hands away. My body aches and trembles in frustration. "Nooo, please, I was so close."

"Mm, and you will be again," Valen says, then looks to Marek behind me. "Bedroom."

Marek scoops me up and cradles me against his chest as he strides down the hall. The scent of pine and steel clings to him, mingling with the heady warmth of his skin. My arms loop around his neck, and I can't resist pressing a kiss to his scruffy jaw, earning a soft growl and a muttered, "Sorceress," making me grin.

The bedroom is dimly lit, the glow of the fireplace casting flickering shadows across the walls. Marek sets me down gently in the center of the bed. He stands and finishes undressing, the firelight highlighting the hard planes of his body.

Valen enters a moment later, already gloriously naked, and joins Marek at the end of the bed.

Valen is all light and grace, his lean muscles sculpted like a marble statue. He's slightly taller, his skin smooth and unblemished, his golden hair catching the warm glow of the fire.

Marek, by contrast, is raw power. His darker skin glistens in the firelight, scars crisscrossing his chest and arms—testaments to battles fought and survived. Where Valen is all slim strength, Marek is sheer mass, muscle layered upon muscle, broad and thick.

They're opposites, but together, they're a masterpiece—a perfect balance, two halves of a whole.

Valen steps closer to Marek, and their eyes lock. Without a word, their mouths meet in a kiss that is both fierce and tender. Marek's hand slides down Valen's back, gripping the curve of his ass possessively, while Valen's hand wraps around Marek's cock.

Heat drips between my thighs as I watch them. Then Valen pulls back just enough to murmur something against Marek's lips, a wicked smile playing on his face. Marek's dark eyes flicker toward me, and for a moment, I feel like prey caught between two predators.

The men climb onto the bed, lying on either side of me. They cage me in a way that feels more protective than predatory, just like they have in the dozens of fantasies that

have played on a loop in my mind since the night I first saw them together. Only this is better. This is real.

Valen's mouth finds mine again, his kiss deep and consuming. His hand cups my jaw, his thumb brushing over my cheek while Marek's lips trail down the curve of my neck, leaving a path of fire in their wake. He doesn't stop until he reaches my breast and his warm mouth claims my nipple. His tongue flicks and swirls in a hypnotic rhythm as his hand kneads my other breast.

The sensations blur together—Valen's demanding kiss, Marek's rough hands, the intoxicating mix of their scents: cedar and leather, pine and steel. My body arches into their ministrations, every nerve ending alight with pleasure.

Valen's voice cuts through the haze, low and commanding, sending a thrill straight to my core. "I need to taste her, Marek. Open her for me."

In one fluid motion, Marek sits back against the headboard, his strong chest a solid wall behind me as he guides me to rest against him. His hands hook under my knees and spread my legs wide. The cool air grazes my sensitive skin, and I shiver. Then Marek's hands move lower, his callused fingers teasing my swollen clit. My head rests against his shoulder, and a soft moan escapes me.

Every part of me is exposed, obscenely on display, being held open by one man for the pleasure of another. I've never felt so seen, so desired, so turned on.

Valen kneels between my legs, his dark blue eyes fixed on mine as he leans in, his breath ghosting over my aching flesh. It's not the exposure that makes me suddenly feel too vulnerable—it's the way he looks at me, like he's seeing not just my body but my very being. The intensity of it burns, and I squeeze my eyes shut, desperate for a barrier between us.

But Valen isn't having it.

"Look at me, Stella."

The command touches something deep inside me, something I didn't know was there that responds immediately. My eyes flutter open and lock on his.

"Good girl. Keep them on me. I want to watch your soul as you fall apart."

The statement pierces through the haze of pleasure, too intense, too profound for what should be a casual encounter. But nothing about this feels casual. The vulnerability, the rawness, the unspoken connection coursing between us—it's unlike anything I've ever experienced. My chest tightens, the air between us crackling with an energy I can't name, and as Valen dips his head, I know I'm on the edge of something I'll never fully recover from.

The first brush of Valen's tongue on my sex sends a lightning bolt through my body. My back arches, and my hands fist the blanket beneath me. Marek's grip tightens, his thumbs stroking soothing circles against my thighs as Valen works me with a precision that leaves me trembling.

The room fills with the sinful sounds of my ragged breaths and their low murmurs of encouragement. Valen's tongue moves with unrelenting skill, his every flick and stroke deliberate and devastating. He adds his fingers to the onslaught, and it's all too much and not enough at the same time.

Marek leans down, and his lips find mine in a searing kiss that swallows my moans. The combination is overwhelming, and when release crashes over me, it's not a gentle wave but a tidal force that leaves me shuddering and gasping in their arms.

But they don't stop there. Valen pulls back, his lips glistening, and he looks up at me

with that wicked smirk before climbing up beside me. His strong arms gather me into his lap, his cock pressing hard and hot against my hip. Marek shifts seamlessly into Valen's place, his broad shoulders settling between my legs as his dark eyes meet mine.

Their hands and mouths are everywhere, tracing paths of fire along my skin. Valen's lips find the sensitive curve of my neck, nipping and sucking as his hands explore my curves. Marek's mouth is equally insistent, his tongue and lips worshiping me with a devotion that sends fresh waves of heat coursing through my limbs.

Time is meaningless. They push me to the edge again and again, my cries mingling with their whispered praises and commands, blending into a symphony of pleasure, one that has me surrendering completely, body and soul.

Valen's deep voice cuts through the haze. "Marek, lie on your back. I want Stella on top of you."

Without hesitation, Marek moves, his powerful frame stretching out across the bed, muscles flexing as he settles into position. Valen grips my waist and guides me to straddle Marek. The heat of his body radiates against mine as I lower myself onto him and Valen positions me so the captain's thick cock is pinned between our bodies.

I rock my pelvis forward, gliding my clit along his shaft from root to crown. Marek's sharp inhale is followed by a low, guttural groan that makes me grin.

"Wicked fucking sorceress," he grates out, gripping my hips to hold me in place.

"What's the matter, Captain," I tease, leaning forward to let my breasts brush against his chest. "Are we overstimula—" My words are cut off as Valen positions himself behind me and the thick head of his cock pushes inside me. He sinks in only an inch or two, but even that makes me feel impossibly full.

Marek's devilish smirk matches the low, taunting tone of Valen's voice in my ear. "What's the matter, pet?" He cups my breasts, and I hiss in a breath when his fingers tweak my nipples. "Are we overstimulated?"

"Very funny," I manage to bite out, though my defiance falters as Valen pushes in deeper, the stretch both excruciating and delicious. I lean back against him, a string of half-formed syllables escaping me as he takes me inch by deliberate inch.

"Breathe, Stella. Relax and let me in. That's it...just like that. Almost there. Good girl." His forehead drops to my shoulder, his shallow breaths hot against my back as his body trembles with restraint. "Fucking hell," he groans. "I need a moment. You're gripping me like a gauntlet."

Marek reaches down and wraps his hand around his own cock, stroking himself with a deliberate slowness.

Before he can enjoy a second of it, Valen's hand shoots out and slaps Marek's away. "I don't recall giving you permission for that. Hands on the headboard and keep them there. You've lost touching privileges." Marek's lips part, ready to argue, but Valen doesn't give him the chance. "One word and you'll be lucky if I let you come for the next week."

Marek's black eyes narrow, but he doesn't challenge the prince. Instead, he does as commanded, reaching back and gripping the top of the wooden headboard, biceps flexing. His jaw twitches but he remains silent, obedient.

"Good boy," Valen murmurs, and then he begins to move.

A chorus of moans erupts from all three of us as Valen pulls me back onto his cock, the sensation of being filled almost too much to bear. His hands grip my hips firmly, guiding my movements as he sets the pace, his thrusts perfectly synced with the glide

of my body along Marek's length.

The friction on my clit as Valen moves me forward sends sparks shooting through my core, and at the top of every stroke, Marek's thick crown presses against me, teasing the sensitive bundle of nerves. The momentary emptiness is immediately replaced by the delicious stretch of Valen's cock filling me again. Every stroke, every shift, every angle is an intoxicating mix that I'm not certain I'll survive.

Marek watches me from below, his hands gripping the headboard so tightly his knuckles whiten.

"You feel it, don't you, Stella?" Valen's voice is rough, his lips brushing my ear. "The way you're made for us. The way your body craves this. Craves us."

I can't speak; the sensations are too overwhelming, too consuming. All I can do is nod, my fingers clutching at Marek's chest for balance as my body moves of its own accord, chasing every ounce of pleasure they're giving me.

Valen leans forward, his body blanketing mine until I'm pressed flush against Marek. Marek lifts his head, his mouth finding mine in a kiss that steals what little breath I have left. His lips are firm, demanding, and consuming, as though he wants to claim every piece of me that Valen hasn't already touched.

We lose ourselves in each other, the world beyond the bed forgotten. Valen's steady rhythm pushes me closer to the brink, the friction so perfectly tuned it's almost unbearable. Marek groans against my lips, the sound vibrating through my chest. Only when our lungs burn for air do we break apart, gasping as though we're drowning. And I suppose we are.

Valen shifts behind me, his hips angling slightly, and the next thrust is devastating. A bolt of pleasure arcs through me, tearing a cry from my lips. Marek echoes my

reaction with a deep, guttural groan, his muscles going taut beneath me as if he feels every inch of Valen's cock through my body.

"My prince, please ," Marek rasps, his voice breaking on the plea. His body trembles beneath mine, his restraint fraying with every second.

"Yes, Marek," Valen responds, a low rumble of permission.

Marek growls, his entire frame tensing as his release claims him. Ropes of white streak across his chest and abdomen, each pulse matched by a shudder that rocks the bed. The sight of him lost in his pleasure is hypnotic, more erotic than I ever thought possible. Valen runs a hand over Marek's hair and down the side of his face in wordless praise, but his pace with me never falters.

The intensity builds, my own body teetering on the brink. "Fuck, I'm so close," I moan, my voice trembling as my hands clutch at Marek's skin, fingers splayed against his still-heaving chest.

Valen's lips brush against my ear, his words a dark, commanding caress. "That's it, Stella. Come on my cock. Show Marek how beautiful you are when you fly."

The sheer force of his words triggers my release, and I shatter beneath them into a thousand tiny pieces. My body convulses, my mouth falling open in a silent scream as wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me. Valen's guttural moan is my only warning before he withdraws and paints the sensitive area between my cheeks with molten heat.

Valen makes quick work of cleaning us up. When he's done, the three of us collapse into a tangled heap, my body spent and my mind blissfully blank.

Marek lies at my side, his strong arm draped over my waist, his lips brushing a

lingering kiss to my temple. Valen cradles me against his chest, his fingers threading gently through my hair.

For the first time in what feels like ever, I let myself simply exist, enveloped in their warmth and the quiet rhythm of their breathing. My eyes drift shut, and as I sink into the pull of sleep, I realize I've found something I didn't know I needed.

Chapter Eleven

Valen

When Stella packed up a basket with fruits, cheeses, a loaf of yeasty bread, and two bottles of wine, she had one request: to go somewhere secluded where we could enjoy a picnic—and each other. I didn't have to think twice about where to take us. The oasis at the edge of the palace grounds is a hidden slice of paradise few people know about and almost no one but Marek and I visit.

The large pool of crystal clear water, fed by natural springs, sparkles under the dappled sunlight filtering through the tall trees. Birdsong mingles with the rustle of leaves in the gentle breeze and the soft nickers of my mare and Marek's gelding grazing nearby.

We've been here for hours, long enough to enjoy the food, savor the wine, and indulge in each other. Now we're lazily sprawled in the shade, half-dressed—Marek and I in nothing but our breeches and Stella in my white shirt that hangs off one shoulder and skims the tops of her thighs. Her brown hair gleams in the filtered sunlight, and her cheeks are still flushed from earlier...endeavors.

I lean back against the rough trunk of a sprawling tree, Stella nestled between my legs, her back pressed to my chest. Marek lies beside us on the blanket, perpendicular to our tangle of limbs, his head cradled on our left legs as Stella's fingers comb lazily through his dark hair. The muscles in his chest shift beneath my hand, which is entwined with his, rising and falling with every deep, steady breath. My other hand trails idle patterns on Stella's soft stomach beneath the shirt, earning an occasional

hum of contentment.

The moment is quiet. Intimate. Perfect.

This is peace. The kind I never knew existed. The kind I've dreamed of but never dared believe I could have.

The kind that isn't mine to keep.

The thought settles like a stone in my chest. I tighten my grip on Marek's hand, needing the contact to anchor me, and press a kiss to the crown of Stella's head, as if that might somehow make the moment last a little longer.

The last few days have felt like a dream, a heady blend of duty and indulgence. Around my family, Stella and I play our parts as the dutiful and enamored betrothed couple seamlessly. Back at the cottage, the facade drops, replaced by something raw, unrestrained, and utterly consuming. Nights of insatiable desire, mornings tangled together, afternoons filled with laughter and stolen touches. It's a rhythm I could get used to, one that feels dangerously close to perfection.

Marek turns his head slightly, his black eyes locking on mine. He doesn't say anything—he doesn't need to. He sees the battle in me, the conflict between wanting this to last forever and knowing it's fleeting.

The light tug of Stella's nails against Marek's scalp pulls a sigh from him, and I smirk. He's always been so serious, so tightly wound, but with her, he softens. With her, we both do.

She breaks the quiet first, her voice thoughtful. "Do you two ever think about having children someday?"

Marek chokes, his body jerking slightly, and I can't help but laugh. "Stella, we don't exactly have the equipment for that."

She rolls her eyes, the movement so dramatic I feel it against my chest. "That's not what I mean. Pretend that didn't matter. Have you ever seen yourselves as fathers?"

Marek shifts slightly, brow knitting, and I know he's mulling over her question. I run my hand down Stella's arm, letting the moment breathe.

"I used to think about it," Marek says finally, his voice quieter than usual, as if pulling the words from a place he rarely allows himself to visit. "But it's not something that can happen for me. Not in the way I used to imagine."

I stay silent, watching the way the lines in his face shift, the way his jaw tightens with restraint.

Stella tilts her head back, glancing up at me. "And you?"

"Absolutely. I'd love to be a father."

She smiles. "Aren't there ways the two of you could have children together?"

"In our kingdom, the Law of Honor and Perception governs the royal family," Marek says. "It's not just about what you do but how you're seen doing it. An official triad might be accepted in theory—if the king and queen consent and the heir is secured. But stepping outside a marriage, especially a royal one, would create an uproar. It would call Valen's fitness as a ruler into question. People would wonder, if he can't honor his vows to a wife, how can he honor his duty to the kingdom? It would be a scandal. One so damning that it could cost him his crown."

Stella tilts her head, and I can see the pieces starting to click into place. "But people

have affairs all the time,” she says carefully. “Even royals. Historically, kings and queens—”

“Historically, yes,” Marek interrupts, his voice firm but not unkind. “But the Kingdom of Swords isn’t like other kingdoms. Here, every move the crown makes is scrutinized under a lens sharper than any blade. The people expect their leaders to be above reproach. To be an example of the honor they demand from themselves. That perception is everything.”

She tenses as Marek’s words sink in, but he isn’t finished.

“For Valen, it wouldn’t just be whispers or rumors. The council would see it as a breach of the sacred trust between the crown and its people. The heir must come first—symbolically and literally. If the prince were seen prioritizing his desires, his lover, over the stability of the kingdom, it would unravel everything.” His black eyes rest on mine, softer now. “I could never do anything to risk that for him. For us. And even if I could set my honor aside, the fallout wouldn’t be worth it.”

I grip his hand tighter, the words striking a chord I feel deep in my heart.

Stella’s gaze darts between us.

“You’re saying...” she starts hesitantly, “you’re saying that what you and Valen feel for each other has to wait. Until my tragic, untimely death. Until this marriage ends.”

Marek nods. “Yes.”

Stella exhales a shaky breath. “But that means...that means you’re both sacrificing everything for this kingdom, for its perception. Valen, you’re sacrificing your happiness. And Marek...you’re sacrificing him.”

I can't speak for fear of saying something I'll regret. But then Marek surprises me. A faint smile tugs at the corner of his lips as he looks up at her.

"It's not a sacrifice, Stella. It's a choice. One we've made together. Because no matter how long we have to wait, it'll be worth it. For Valen's crown. For the kingdom we've both sworn to protect. And for us. Because when the time finally comes..." He turns to me, and the certainty in his eyes threatens to undo me. "When it comes, there won't be anything standing in our way."

I clear my throat, fighting against the emotion rising in me. "So what you're saying is you're planning to make me wait just so I suffer?"

Marek's smirk returns, though it's tempered with something deeper, something raw. "Don't give me too much credit, my prince. You're the one who makes it worth waiting for."

Stella reaches out, brushing her fingers along Marek's jaw as her other hand curls around mine.

"What about you?" I ask, my voice quieter now. "Ever see yourself as a mother?"

Her smile falters, and a shadow of sadness crosses her face. "I think I was looking forward to being a mom more than I ever was to being a wife." She pauses. "But now I'll never be either."

Marek moves without hesitation, lifting her hand to his lips. He presses a kiss to her palm, then rests it back on his chest, next to mine. The gesture is small but filled with so much meaning that my chest tightens.

I glance between them, my gaze sharpening. "What happened?"

Stella hesitates, then lets out a shaky breath. “Ironically, I was supposed to have already had a wedding. But I called it off after I found out he’d been screwing around on me for well over a year.” She swallows hard, and her gaze drifts to the pool of water in the distance. “Pretty much destroyed my faith in the concept of true love and honest partners. At least where I’m concerned.”

My teeth clench, anger simmering at the thought of someone betraying her like that. “You shouldn’t let that bastard’s actions cast a shadow over the rest of your life, Stella.”

“He’s right.” Marek adds. “Just because you gave your trust and love to someone who wasn’t worthy of it doesn’t mean there aren’t others out there who are. Trust me. I know.”

I squeeze his hand, silently thanking him for saying what I couldn’t quite articulate. “You’d be an incredible mother. I can see it now—little girls with your curls and sass running circles around Marek’s children. And little boys with your light brown eyes talking circles around Marek himself.”

She laughs, the sound like music, and Marek scoffs as he props himself up on his elbows. “My kids besting yours in the sparring ring, just like I do you? Sounds about right.”

I smirk as he stands, his breeches hanging dangerously low on his hips as he strides toward the water. He splashes his face, his voice carrying back to us.

“Face it, Valen, royalty or not, my lineage would dominate yours.”

Stella grins and leaps to her feet like a cat. She sneaks up behind him, and with one swift shove, she pushes him into the pool. The splash is nothing short of spectacular, the water spraying high into the air as Marek resurfaces with a glare, water streaming

down his face.

“Really?”

She doubles over laughing, her curls bouncing as she clutches her stomach. I can’t help but join in.

Marek’s dark eyes narrow, and he extends a hand toward her. “Help me out then.”

The moment her fingers touch his, he yanks her into the water with him. Her shriek turns into a burst of laughter as she surfaces, pushing her riotous curls back from her face.

For a moment, I allow myself to dream. To imagine a world where this isn’t temporary. Where Stella doesn’t have to leave. Where the three of us can exist together—not as a secret, not as a lie, but as something real and lasting, days like this stretching endlessly into the future.

But reality always has a way of intruding, no matter how sweet the fantasy.

My thoughts shift to the message I received earlier this morning. The initial report of Elara’s sighting in the Kingdom of Pentacles had been hopeful, but the new details darkened it considerably. She’d reportedly been captured by a pawn dealer and sold at auction to a traveler described as intimidating in size and demeanor.

I haven’t told Stella yet. Not because I doubt her strength—her resilience is one of the things I admire most about her—but because the information isn’t confirmed. If it’s true, if Elara really has been taken...? I need more answers before burdening her with the worst-case scenario.

So for now, I hold on to the secret, letting this moment of peace and laughter stretch a

little longer.

“Is that all you’ve got, Captain?” Stella’s teasing voice pulls me back to the present just as she launches another water attack at Marek.

He laughs before lunging toward her, his strong arms catching her easily and pulling her under with him. When they both resurface, Marek’s black eyes glint, his hair dripping as he shakes off the water like a wolf, while Stella’s radiant smile seems to outshine even the sun.

I let myself smile too. Not because the weight on my chest has lifted—it hasn’t—but because for now, they’re happy. We’re happy.

And I’ll do whatever it takes to protect that happiness for as long as I have the power to do so.

Chapter Twelve

Marek

I wake before dawn, the faint light of the moon casting silvery shadows across the room. Stella is curled up beside me, her warm, soft body pressed against mine. Her breathing is deep and even, a gentle, soothing rhythm. I watch her for a moment as I brush a stray curl from her cheek. She stirs but doesn't wake, murmuring something incomprehensible before snuggling closer.

It's the day before the wedding already. The last two weeks have passed in a blur, yet every moment feels seared into my memory as vivid as a dream, and I never want to wake.

Stella's quick wit and playful sarcasm match Valen's dry humor, making them a formidable duo when it comes to teasing me. I've lost count of the times I've found myself laughing despite myself, their mischief disarming in a way I hadn't realized I needed.

She's gotten into the habit of massaging my shoulders at the end of the day, her deft hands easing the knots from hours of training and tension. And then there are the notes she leaves—playful little reminders that appear in the oddest places. Like the one tucked into my sword belt, scrawled in her loopy handwriting: Don't forget to smile today. You're better-looking when you do.

Falling into a routine with her and Valen has been so effortless it's unnerving. Days filled with carefully choreographed performances for the royal family, nights lost to

passionate abandon.

She doesn't try to belong with us—she simply does.

It's as though she's always been here, sliding seamlessly into the spaces neither Valen nor I realized we'd left open.

My thoughts drift to the night before. Stella, her thighs trembling as she straddled my face, her hands tangled in my hair as I devoured her sweet cunt, pulling cries of pleasure from her that echoed through the room. Valen had been behind her, his lean, powerful frame pressed against hers as he drove his thick cock deep inside me. His hands had gripped her hips as we moved in perfect harmony, driving each other higher, driving each other toward bliss.

I've been with Valen so long that I forgot the things I enjoy about a woman. The softness of Stella's curves beneath my hands, the floral sweetness of her scent, the way her taste lingers on my tongue like the finest wine. And none of that diminishes what I feel for Valen. It's a different kind of fire but no less consuming. I'll never stop loving his strength, the rough scrape of his scruff against my neck, or the way his scent—a blend of cedar and leather—wraps around me like a well-worn cloak.

I realize Valen isn't in bed. Carefully, I extricate myself from Stella's embrace, tucking the blankets around her so she won't get cold. She murmurs in her sleep, her lips curving into a soft, contented smile, and it strikes me again how easily she's come to feel like home. I slip on a pair of loose trousers and a shirt, padding barefoot through the quiet cottage in search of him.

I find him outside, sitting on the steps with a glass of whiskey in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. The cool night air carries the scent of dew and distant wildflowers, mingling with the faint smoke from last night's fire. Valen's profile is etched in the dim light, his expression unreadable as he stares at the paper. I approach

quietly and lower myself onto the step beside him.

“You’re up early,” I remark, my voice soft enough not to shatter the calm.

Valen glances at me, the corner of his mouth twitching in what might pass for a smile. “Couldn’t sleep.” He holds up the parchment. “This came late last night.”

I take it, and my eyes scan the brief but unsettling message. It confirms what we’d feared: Elara has been sold at a pawn auction to a man named Lord Tathame. She was seen at Lady Clayton’s Mabon Festival, but since then, no one in the Kingdom of Pentacles has reported sightings.

“You’ll have to tell her,” I say, handing the paper back.

Valen nods, his jaw flexing as his fingers curl tightly around the parchment. “She’ll worry.”

“Of course she will.” I lean back on my hands, tilting my head to look at the faint glimmer of stars still visible in the early morning sky. “But she’s stronger than you give her credit for. We’ll reassure her, and once the wedding is behind us, we’ll go after Elara together. With your resources, it won’t take long to find this Tathame and free Elara from his service.”

Valen exhales a long breath, and the tension in his shoulders eases slightly, but his gaze remains distant, fixed on the horizon. I study him for a moment before speaking again.

“You’ve already fallen for her.”

Valen’s exhale is sharp, almost a laugh. “Haven’t you?”

I curse under my breath and reach for the glass of whiskey in his hand. He lets it go without protest, and I down the remainder in one burning swig. The liquor scorches a path down my throat, but it does nothing to dull the truth.

I've fallen for Stella.

I'd never thought it possible to feel for anyone the way I feel for Valen, but Stella slipped into my heart without me even noticing.

She doesn't fit into my world, not the way Valen does. She's the bloom of wildflowers in a battlefield—unexpected, beautiful, and utterly at odds with the life I've built. But damn it, I don't want her to leave. The thought of her walking out of our lives, of this fleeting perfection shattering into something I can't repair... It's unbearable.

"Perhaps she is a sorceress," Valen jokes, though his voice lacks its usual sharpness. "That's the only explanation. To fell both of us as she has?"

I smirk and shake my head. "Me definitely. But I saw the writing on the wall with you the moment you carried her here. Like bringing home a stray."

Valen turns to me with a raised brow, feigning offense. "You make it sound as though I have a history in that respect."

"You do," I counter with a chuckle and lean forward to rest my elbows on my knees. "You forget I've known you since the beginning. I was there when you convinced the king and queen to take me in after my parents died so I wouldn't end up in the orphanage in the southern province. And that's not even mentioning the random animals you've rescued over the years. You've always had a bleeding heart, Valen."

He shakes his head.. "Not this time. Not when it came to her," he mutters, his voice

quieter now. “When Stella first arrived, I wasn’t thinking about her—about who she was or what this would mean for her. I was thinking only of myself. Of you and me and what she could do for us. I would have used her, Marek. Used her to protect us. And it’s not right. It never was.” His gaze drops to the ground, and he exhales as though saying the truth out loud might physically hurt. “I never gave her a choice. Not really. And now, no matter what happens, she’ll leave. She’ll walk away, and I’ll deserve it.” His words hit harder than I expect, and they steal my breath. I turn to Valen, cupping his jaw and forcing him to meet my gaze. I kiss him slowly, deeply, pouring everything I can’t bring myself to say into the connection.

Valen responds in kind, his hand sliding up to grip my arm, holding me in place as our mouths move together. When we finally break apart, I rest my forehead against his and close my eyes to keep the ache at bay.

“You’re a good man, Valen,” I murmur, the words breaking free before I can hold them back. “I’m going to miss you.”

His grip tightens slightly, his voice a low rumble as he replies, “You’ll still be the captain of my guard. You’ll be with me day and night, Marek. On the training field, in the council chamber, at my side always.” His tone softens, but there’s an edge of desperation beneath it. “You won’t be far from me. You never are.”

Slowly, I stand, the space between us yawning open like a wound. I keep my distance, though every part of me aches to close it, to reach for him. But I can’t. I won’t. “You know what I mean, Valen,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel. “You know I’ll have to stay away.”

Valen’s jaw tightens, his blue eyes flashing with anger and something far more vulnerable. He rises to his feet, but he doesn’t say anything, so I keep going, the words dragging out of me like a blade from my chest.

“The Law of Honor and Perception isn’t just a rule—it’s who you are. It’s who we are as a kingdom. If we give in, if we let this...us...take precedence, it wouldn’t just be a betrayal of your vows. It would be a betrayal of the kingdom.” I take a step closer, hating myself for the way his gaze softens, for the hope that flickers across his face even as I keep my hands fisted at my sides. “You’re more than a prince. You’re a symbol of Swords.”

Valen’s hand shoots out, gripping my wrist before I can move away. He pulls me close, and suddenly the space between us vanishes. “I know what I am, Marek. But none of it means anything if I don’t have you.”

His words crack something deep inside me, but I fight to keep my composure, swallowing the ache that threatens to spill over. “Valen...” My voice falters, and I force myself to continue. “If anyone, even for a moment, doubts your ability to lead because of me, because of us, I would never forgive myself.”

I take a step back, my hand brushing his arm before I pull away entirely. It feels like tearing a part of my soul from my body, and I have to clench my fists to keep from reaching for him again. His eyes widen, hurt flashing across his face as he takes a half step toward me, but I hold up a hand to stop him.

“Don’t,” I say, my voice trembling. “Don’t make this harder than it already is.”

His jaw tightens, the muscle ticking with restraint.

I pause, swallowing against the lump rising in my throat. “I love you. Gods, you know I do.” The words come out thick with emotion, and Valen’s shoulders tense like he’s bracing for a blow. “But that’s why I have to stay away from you, from your bed. Because loving you means protecting you, even from this. Especially from this.”

Valen stares at me, his chest rising and falling with each labored breath, his blue eyes

stormy. For a moment, I think he might argue, might pull me back to him, but instead, he exhales and turns his gaze toward the horizon.

“I hate you for what you’re going to do,” he whispers, his voice breaking. “But gods help me, Marek, I love you for it too.”

Without another word, I turn and walk away. Each step feels like a betrayal, a denial of everything I want but cannot have. I don’t look back. I can’t. If I see his face again, if I catch the glimmer of unshed tears in his eyes, I’ll break. And I can’t afford to break. Not now. Not ever.

Behind me, the sound of glass shattering, the whiskey tumbler meeting its end against the stone steps. It’s a sharp, final note that echoes in the early morning quiet. But still, I don’t stop.

When I reach the edge of the garden, I glance up at the sky where the first rays of dawn begin to streak the clouds with gold and rose. A new day is coming, full of duty and sacrifice, and I’ll face it the only way I know how.

By putting Valen first. Always. Even if it means losing myself in the process.

Chapter Thirteen

Stella

The banquet hall hums with life. The sounds of muffled laughter and clinking glasses spill into the corridor where I wait. My heart races, the enormity of what's happening pressing down on me like the weight of the crown I'm pretending to deserve. In a few moments, I'll step into a room filled with nobles from all over the Kingdom of Swords—all here to scrutinize me, a stranger from another world masquerading as Prince Valen Greymourn's betrothed.

I smooth a hand down the skirt of my gown, willing my fingers to stop trembling. Before I can spiral further, the door opens, and Valen steps into the hallway. He's devastatingly handsome in his formal attire. The silver and black brocade of his coat catches the torchlight, and his easy smile immediately softens the tightness in my chest.

"Nervous, pet?" he asks as he takes my hand in his.

I nod, unable to summon words. His thumb brushes across my knuckles, and he leans down to press a kiss to the back of my hand.

"You'll be fine," he says, his eyes holding mine with an assurance I desperately need. "Marek and I will be with you the entire time."

He tucks my arm into his, and just like that, I'm not alone anymore.

The heavy doors swing open to reveal the banquet hall beyond. The room falls silent as we step inside and every head turns toward us. The dining hall is illuminated by flickering chandeliers, and three long tables skirt the perimeter. They form a U-shape and are draped in violet and silver cloths, their surfaces glinting with fine crystal and polished silverware.

At the head table are two empty chairs flanked by Valen's parents on one side and Marek and Lance on the other. King Orvyn and Queen Vynestra stand in greeting, and a ripple of movement follows as the dozens of unknown guests get to their feet.

The herald's voice booms out, echoing against the vaulted ceiling.

"Prince Valen Greymourn and his betrothed, Lady Stella of the House of Calloway, hailing from the venerable northern province of Ironvale!"

The title is foreign and heavy, but I lift my chin, cling to Valen's steady presence, and force my legs to carry me forward.

My gaze seeks out Marek, and his dark eyes are already locked on mine, grounding me in a way words never could. I expect him to at least glance at the man escorting me, but he doesn't. There was a lot to take care of with the upcoming ceremony, and I wasn't around them much today. But when I was, it was impossible not to notice the strain between them.

Valen guides me around the end of the head table where he pulls out my chair and waits for me to sit before taking his own. Marek's hand brushes mine in a fleeting touch as I settle into the seat between them. It's subtle, almost imperceptible, but not to Valen. He notices. Of course he does. When it comes to Marek—and now me—the prince misses nothing.

The room erupts in a chorus of scraping chairs as the guests take their seats, the

collective noise echoing in my ears like thunder. Valen remains standing, lifting his goblet in a gesture that commands attention.

“Thank you all for joining us tonight,” he begins, his voice carrying easily across the hall. “Your presence here is a testament to the strength and unity of our kingdom. Tomorrow, I will stand before you all with Lady Calloway, and together, we will forge a new path—one I hope will bring prosperity to us all.”

He glances down at me, his smile softening into something more intimate, something that speaks to me alone.

“I never expected this. I never expected her.” He pauses, the words hanging in the air as he looks at me with a tenderness that makes my chest ache. “Stella entered my life suddenly. One moment, my world was as it had always been, and the next... Well, I can’t remember what it was like before her.”

There’s a smattering of approving murmurs from the guests, but Valen’s eyes never leave mine.

“Love,” he continues, his gaze sweeping over the room but always returning to me, “has a way of surprising us, of breaking down walls we thought impenetrable. It demands courage, vulnerability, and trust. And if we’re fortunate, it gives us strength in return.” He raises his goblet higher, his eyes flickering briefly to Marek before focusing outward on the gathered crowd. “To love, loyalty, and the strength we find in one another!”

The crowd bursts into applause, glasses clinking together in celebration. But for the three of us, the toast lands in a different way. It’s not just a declaration to the nobles of the Kingdom of Swords—it’s a vow. A promise woven into the lie we’re living.

At last, the dinner begins, and with the attention no longer solely on us, I manage to

relax, though not by much. I'm sure the food is exquisite, but I'm too nervous about missing my mouth or dropping my fork in front of an audience to notice. Thankfully, my wineglass is never empty, and by the time we've finished with the dessert course, I no longer give a flying fig about all the eyes on me. The free-flowing wine also seems to have eased the earlier tension between Valen and Marek, because their teasing banter is out in full force.

"What happens next?" I ask Valen as the last of the dishes are whisked away.

"Now we see how good of a dance instructor the captain is," he says with a humorous waggle of his brows.

Marek leans forward to regard the prince. "If she is anything less than the picture of grace with you, Your Highness, then it is the fault of the one leading her, not the one who instructed her."

"Duly noted, Captain Drayk." Valen winks at Marek before rising to his feet and extending his hand to me with a flourish. "Shall we, my lady?"

I take his hand and offer Marek a playful smile. "If only to defend my dance instructor's honor."

Marek's rare chuckle rumbles softly, warming my chest even more than the wine. I wish I could bottle the sound and keep it with me for all the days ahead—days that will take me far from this. The thought threatens to dampen my mood, but I shove it aside, determined to savor what I have while I have it.

Valen leads me to the center of the dance floor as the musicians strike up a lilting melody, the soft pressure of his palm at my back steadying me as we take our places. We begin to move, and he guides me effortlessly through the steps I just learned yesterday.

“You’re a natural,” Valen murmurs, his voice low enough that only I can hear.

“I think it has more to do with my partner,” I reply, earning a soft laugh from him.

Around us, the dance floor begins to fill, the whirl of silks and jewels creating a mesmerizing blur. As we turn, my gaze lands on the edge of the dance floor. Marek stands with the king and queen, their expressions unusually soft. The queen holds Marek’s hands between hers, and the king claps a firm hand on his shoulder.

I glance up at Valen, whose focus remains where mine lingered. “They care for him, don’t they? Like family.”

“He is family. Marek and I have been inseparable since we were boys. His parents worked in the palace, a cook and a steward, and we met running through these very halls. Marek was nine when his parents passed. He would have been sent to an orphanage, but I begged my parents to take him in.”

“And they did.”

“They did.” His steps slow as if reliving the memory. “Though Marek insisted on earning his keep. Even at that age, he had a fierce sense of pride. The moment he was old enough, he moved into the barracks with the royal guard and trained harder than anyone. He rose through the ranks on sheer determination, but to my parents, he’s always been like another son.”

I watch Marek as he exchanges a few more words with the queen. “And when you and Marek...” I hesitate, searching for the right words. “Became more than friends?”

Valen’s gaze flickers with something I can’t quite name. “They supported us. My father made me the kingdom’s emissary so Marek and I could travel, explore the realm without the constraints of court expectations or prying eyes. We always knew it

was only a matter of time before I would have to marry and produce an heir. My mother, gods bless her, has suggested a triad more than once.”

“A triad?” My steps falter, and Valen’s arm tightens around my waist to keep me steady. “Marek said something about that too. How would that work?”

“A marriage between Marek and me and a woman we care for who would continue the royal line. Triads aren’t uncommon, and my mother believed it could work.” Valen sighs. “The royal lines’ traditions matter greatly to Marek, more so than they do to me, and there’s never been a triad in the history of our line. You recall that he claims the disruption could damage interkingdom relations or undermine the people’s trust in me as their leader.”

I study Valen’s face and catch the faint crease of frustration between his eyes. “That’s not the entire reason, is it?”

Valen’s silence speaks volumes. I don’t need him to answer, not really. Not when I already know what he’ll say.

“He can’t bring himself to trust another woman after what happened with his first wife.” Sympathy mingles with a sharp pang of understanding. “I can’t blame him. After my fiancé’s betrayal, I swore off trusting men entirely.”

“And yet here you are,” he says softly. “Helping us, standing by us, and trusting us in your own way.”

I shake my head, offering a faint, bittersweet smile. “It makes this all feel...justified. Like the lies I’ve told are worth it. In the end, it means you and Marek can be together, truly together, without duty looming over you.”

Valen pulls me closer, his movements slowing to a sway as the music crescendos

around us. “I don’t know what I will do without you, Stella.” His lips brush my temple. “But I do know I’ll spend the rest of my life being grateful for you.”

The dance continues, but I’m distracted when a high, lilting laugh ripples through the hall, startlingly similar to Elara’s. My chest tightens as her face flashes through my mind. Valen told me this morning what little he’d learned—how she’d been sold at a pawn auction, how she’s now owned by some man. I’m terrified for her, for what she might have endured—what she might still be enduring. But Valen and Marek promised that after the wedding, we’d set out to find her together. I just have to make it through tomorrow.

Valen twirls me again, and my gaze naturally seeks out the missing piece of our equation. Marek has moved to the entrance of the hall and is speaking with a man I’m positive I would’ve noticed had he been here during dinner. Tall and broad with dark hair and a trim beard, he carries himself more like Marek than the carefree, oblivious nobles.

“Who’s that?” I ask Valen, nodding toward Marek and the stranger and the easy camaraderie between them.

The song draws to an elegant close, and Valen tucks me into his side. His gaze follows mine, and his expression lights with surprise before melting into a smile. “That’s Greve. He was one of my personal guards. He traveled with me for years, and he became more like a friend. He left a while back to handle personal matters. I had no idea he’d returned.”

“Then let’s say hello,” I suggest, curious about the man who seems to share a deeper connection with Marek and Valen than most.

Valen’s smile brightens as he threads my arm through his as we weave our way off the dance floor. Both men notice our approach, their conversation halting as we near.

Greve turns to us and gives Valen a shallow bow before they clasp forearms.

“Welcome back, Greve. It’s been far too long.”

“It’s good to see you, Your Highness. I came to offer my congratulations.” Greve’s questioning gaze sweeps between Valen, Marek, and me. “It seems much has changed in my absence.”

Marek crosses his arms over his chest and mutters, “Not as much as you might think.”

Valen shoots Marek a brief, pointed look. “Allow me to introduce you to my fiancée,” he says, turning to me and resting his hand lightly on my back. “My dear, this is Ronan Greve, one of the finest men to ever serve the crown. Greve, meet my betrothed, Lady Stella Calloway.”

Ronan’s composed expression falters, but the break is so quick that I start to doubt it ever happened. He inclines his head and offers me a reserved smile. “A pleasure to meet you, Lady Calloway.”

“The pleasure is mine,” I reply, but I can’t ignore the sharpness in his gaze, the way he studies me as though peeling back layers to see what lies beneath.

“Your name is unique,” he says after a moment. “Where is it that you hail from?”

I reply instantly, the answer automatic by now. “Ironvale, the northern province.”

Before I can say more, a woman’s voice calls out from the entrance.

“Ronan!”

Ronan's expression transforms in an instant, softening with genuine affection. He turns and extends a hand to the source of the voice, and a striking woman steps into view. Her fiery red hair tumbles over her shoulders in loose waves that complement her emerald gown and pale green eyes as she gazes lovingly up at him.

"Your Highness, Captain Drayk," Ronan begins, "allow me to introduce—"

"Elara?" The name tears from my lips before I can think. My heart leaps as recognition crashes over me.

Her eyes meet mine, wide and disbelieving. "Stella?"

We collide in an embrace that feels like coming home. The room and its occupants fade into nothingness as I clutch her tightly, tears pricking the corners of my eyes and spilling down my cheeks.

"You're here. You're safe."

"So are you," she replies, her voice thick with emotion as she clings to me. "I was afraid I'd never see you again."

Our embrace lasts forever and no time at all, breaking only when Valen's voice cuts through. "Well, this is a pleasant turn of events I didn't see coming." His gaze shifts to Ronan. "Greve, did you rescue her from Tathame? We'd heard the bastard bought her at a pawn auction. We planned to set out after the wedding to track him down."

Still holding tightly to Elara's arm, I glance up at Ronan just as she smirks and nudges him with her elbow. "Go on, my lord," she says, her tone cheeky. "Tell them how we came to be together."

Ronan rubs a hand over his jaw and clears his throat. "I am Tathame. I bought her at

auction, it's true, but the role of pawn was just for appearances. I swear it."

Elara tilts her chin. "Well, mostly for appearances. You did put that magickal collar on me that shocked me like a fifty-thousand-volt stun gun when I tried to run away. But who's keeping track?"

Ronan lets out a long-suffering sigh, his shoulders sagging slightly. "Will you never let me live that down, wife?"

"Not as long as there's breath in your body, husband."

"Wait, time out," I say, raising my hands. "Husband? Are you actually—"

She holds up her left hand, revealing the stunning emerald nestled in a silver band. "Married? Yup. Crazy, right? But so much has happened in such a short amount of time. And you have no room to talk, Stell! We're at your rehearsal dinner for your wedding tomorrow. You're marrying a freaking prince!"

"Okay." I blink. "Fair point."

Valen chuckles. "It sounds like we all have stories to share. Why don't we leave the other guests to their revelry? We can retreat to my rooms upstairs and catch up properly."

Elara and I stayed glued to each other, our hands intertwined as though we were both afraid that the other would disappear if we let go, and over the course of several hours, the five of us talk and tell our stories of what happened to us after we landed in Towerfall. How she went from indentured servant to revenge coconspirator to falling in love and getting married in a small ceremony on Ronan's family estate. And how I went from perceived spy to a bride of convenience and future fake-dead wife to ensure Valen and Marek's happiness.

When I try to hide a yawn behind my hand, Marek stands. “I think it’s time we turn in for the night.”

Valen joins him, setting his glass on the side table. “He’s right. It’s late, and we have a big day tomorrow, pet.”

Elara rises with Ronan, but I keep hold of her hand as I follow. “Noooo, we’ve just been reunited. I’m not ready to be separated from her yet. Stay with me tonight, El, please?”

“Of course I will. After all, as the self-proclaimed matron of honor, it’s my job to get you ready for your own walk down the aisle, real or not. Ronan doesn’t mind spending a night alone, do you?”

She turns a challenging grin on him, one that would be completely ill-advised if it weren’t so clear he’s a total goner for my best friend. His dark eyes soften as he cups her chin with a hand large enough to crush stone.

“Not at all. Just remember, wife, any... distress I feel tonight, you’ll be atoning for tomorrow.”

His tone and the glint in his eyes remind me of Valen when he slips into his dominating role. Marek too, for that matter. And if there’s anything I know about my bestie, it’s that she would never give a man control. But she is about to give him a verbal lash—

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, my lord.”

My jaw unhinges as Elara places her hands on his chest and rises on her toes to press a kiss to his lips.

“Now,” Elara continues with a cheeky grin, patting Ronan’s chest, “I love you, but get the hell out. Shoo, all of you. We still have to gossip about you before we get our beauty sleep.”

Ah, there she is. My feisty, take-no-prisoners best friend. Thank the Universe. For a terrifying second, I’d wondered if she’d been replaced by a pod person.

Valen steps in to smooth over the logistics. “I’ll have someone set up a guest room for you in the palace, Ronan, and have Elara’s things brought here for tonight. She and Stella can stay together while Marek and I return to the cottage.”

Ronan nods, but instead of leaving immediately, he draws Elara into the hallway for a private goodbye that gives me a few moments alone with the man I’m about to marry and the man he loves.

In less than twenty-four hours, I’ll be legally married to Valen—or as legally married as a woman from Manhattan can be to a prince of Towerfall.

My nerves must show, because Valen steps closer, resting a hand at my waist and lifting the other to cup my face. His thumb strokes my cheek in slow, soothing circles as his piercing blue eyes search mine.

“Are you all right, pet?” His voice is gentle, a balm against my frazzled thoughts. “Is there anything you need from us before we leave?”

Tell me I’m not imagining this connection, that you feel as strongly for me as I do for both of you. Tell me what we’ve shared isn’t just an act but something real.

But I bite back the words, forcing a smile instead. I know better. Their love for each other is the kind of eternal bond people dream about. It’s why I’m doing this in the first place—to give them the freedom to live their happily ever after. I’m not a

permanent fixture in their story; I'm just passing through.

"No, I'm all set, thank you," I manage, my voice steady despite the ache swelling in my chest.

Valen studies me for a moment longer, his gaze searching mine as though he wants to argue, but instead, he sighs softly. "We have a lot to figure out. But those decisions can wait until after the wedding. If you still want to go back home, I'll find a way to get you there. If you want to stay in Towerfall, I can set you up with whatever life you want. We'll talk about it all tomorrow."

His words are kind, but they only add to the ache. Tomorrow will come, and with it, the end of this fantasy I've built with them.

"Marek, say good night to Stella."

Valen releases me into the arms of his lover. My heart hammers against my ribs as I wait to be consumed by Marek's perpetual inferno—a possessive fist in my hair, a grope of my ass, his mouth plundering mine. But tonight, he's different. He keeps his fire banked, allowing only a candle flame of desire through as he presses his lips to mine. The tenderness of it is startling, unraveling, and before I can stop them, tears spring to my eyes.

This isn't just a kiss; it's a goodbye.

My chest tightens, and a silent scream echoes in my mind. How can everything be so achingly perfect, so utterly right, while also tearing me apart?

I kiss him back with everything I have, as if I can stop the moment from slipping through my fingers. But it's not enough. Marek pulls back, his forehead resting against mine, his breath mingling with mine in the stillness.

“Thank you, sorceress,” he whispers. “For everything.”

My throat constricts, and I struggle to swallow past the lump rising there. “Don’t thank me,” I murmur, my voice trembling. “Please, don’t thank me.”

Because the gratitude in his eyes is a painful reminder that this is temporary, that I am temporary.

Marek steps back, and the absence of his touch leaves me cold. He nods to Valen, his jaw tight, before turning and striding out of the room. The door closes softly behind him, but the sound reverberates like thunder.

Valen’s hand finds mine, squeezing gently, but I can’t bring myself to look at him. My vision blurs with unshed tears, the ache in my chest threatening to swallow me whole. I’m standing in a moment that should be filled with love and promise, but all I feel is the quiet devastation of knowing it can’t last.

“Until tomorrow, pet.”

Valen presses a lingering kiss to the top of my head before leaving the room.

Elara returns moments later, and she slips into bed beside me. We lie facing each other, and after a beat, she reaches for my hand.

“You’re worrying,” she says softly, her pale green eyes searching mine. “Don’t try to deny it. I’ve known you too long.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “I guess there’s no point pretending with you.”

“No point at all,” she says, her lips curving into a gentle smile. “So spill. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

I hesitate, but the weight of my thoughts is too much to carry alone. “Elara, tonight...did you see... Did you notice... I mean, with Valen and Marek, do you think they—”

“Please,” she scoffs. “I noticed how you looked at them too. It’s not exactly a mystery, Stell. This is more than some friendly banging. They’re in love with you, and from what I can tell, you’re halfway to falling for them too.”

I exhale, the sound caught between a laugh and a sigh. “Halfway? I’m already there. Somehow, by some miracle or curse, I’ve fallen in love with both of them.”

Her expression softens, her thumb brushing over my knuckles. “Then what’s stopping you?”

“Nothing. Everything.” I bury my face in the pillow, muffling a frustrated groan. “I said I would never do this again. Have these feelings. Why can’t I just be an old cat lady? That sounds great right now—just me, a bunch of cats, and absolutely no drama.”

Elara snorts, tugging at my hand until I’m forced to look at her again. “You? A cat lady? Please. You’d get rid of it the second it scratched up your couch. And you’d be bored within a week.”

I let out a half-hearted laugh, but it quickly fades. “How do I know that I’m not just some...distraction? A means to an end?”

Elara’s gaze sharpens, her voice turning fierce. “You’re neither of those things. Do you think they would’ve let you into their hearts, their lives, if you were? Valen and Marek don’t strike me as the type to take those kinds of risks lightly.”

“But it’s happened before, El. People say one thing, make promises, and then when

the shiny newness fades, they go looking for something with fuchsia lipstick.”

“Darrel cheated on you because he’s a weeping hemorrhoid of a human. His cheating was a testament to his worth. Not yours.”

I blink back tears, the truth of her words hitting me hard. She’s right—I know she is—but the weight of my doubts feels too heavy to ignore. “Don’t I need to go back to New York? My clients, my life—”

“There’s no one waiting for us back home. Your clients will be assigned to another social worker. And your life? We’re the only family we have. Now we’re here, together. And if there’s one thing I know about you, Stella, it’s that you don’t give up on people, and you don’t give up on yourself. If you love Valen and Marek, really love them, then it’s time to stop waiting for them to figure it out and make a proposal of your own.”

I stiffen. “A proposal?”

Elara grins. “Valen made one to you. That’s how this whole beautiful mess started in the first place, isn’t it?”

I press my lips together, unable to answer. Unable to sort out whether I’m willing to take the risk.

Elara sighs, her voice gentle. “Look, I can’t tell you what to do, Stell. But I can tell you this—you’re not replaceable. Not to them. Not to me. And if you let fear make your choices for you, you’re going to regret it.”

My throat tightens, and a fresh surge of tears pricks my eyes. Could I risk everything—my heart, my trust, my very soul—for something as fragile and terrifying as love?

“Sleep on it,” she says, giving my hand a final squeeze. “Towerfall will still be here in the morning.”

I roll onto my back and stare at the shadows dancing on the ceiling. My fears haven’t vanished, but for the first time, I let myself consider something else—hope.

Hope that love could be more than pain. Hope that I could be more than a fleeting moment in someone else’s story. Hope that the Universe wouldn’t lead me all the way here just to rip away the people who feel like home.

The silence stretches, Elara’s breathing evening out beside me as she drifts to sleep. But I remain awake, my heart pounding as the quiet realization takes hold.

Tomorrow isn’t just the wedding.

Tomorrow, everything changes.

Chapter Fourteen

Valen

The soft morning light filters through the curtains of my room, painting the ornate furniture in muted gold. The air is heavy with the scent of sandalwood and a faint, lingering trace of Marek's skin on mine.

My limbs ache, a bittersweet reminder of the hours we spent tangled together in the cottage. Every kiss, every touch felt like a desperate bid to hold on. But time, relentless as always, brought us here. To this room. To this day. To the start of years spent apart in all the ways that matter most.

Marek is quiet beside me as he buttons his ceremonial coat. I mirror him, my hands going through the motions of dressing without much thought. The material feels heavier today, the silver embroidery like chains binding me to the role I've been born to play.

Marek catches my eye in the mirror. His dark gaze is steady, resolute. But I know there's more he's hiding behind the calm. I know it because I'm hiding my own.

I break his gaze and tug on the ends of my coat, my thoughts turning to Stella. Is she nervous? Scared? I know she's strong, stronger than she gives herself credit for, but this marriage is as much a sacrifice for her as it is for me. She didn't ask for this. She didn't choose this life, this performance we've choreographed for the benefit of the court and the kingdom.

Yet even through the grief of what I'm losing with Marek, there's something else I can't ignore. There's an undeniable spark of anticipation, an unexpected warmth at the thought of seeing her walk down that aisle.

My feelings for Stella are real. As real as the vows I'll speak today, even if the ceremony is a charade for everyone else. Even if the foundation of this marriage is a web of necessity, deception, and duty, I can't deny the truth of what I feel when I look at her.

But the world doesn't bend for love. Not all of ours at least.

A sharp knock shatters the stillness, snapping me from my thoughts. Marek glances at me before he strides to the door. He opens it, and the sight that greets us takes my breath away.

Stella stands there, radiant and otherworldly. Her wedding gown shimmers, the silks and jewels seeming to shift with every movement. The delicate tiara perched on her head catches the light like a crown of stars, while her curls frame her face in a way that makes her beauty almost unbearable to look at. She doesn't just look like a queen—she looks like our queen.

"Stella?" I manage, stepping toward her, concern blooming as the determined set of her mouth registers. "Is something wrong?"

She draws in a shaky breath and steps inside. "I've been up all night," she says, clasping her trembling hands in front of her. "I couldn't sleep. It isn't right that you two will have to be apart for years."

Marek stiffens beside me, but I can't take my eyes off Stella. "We've already explained why it has to be this way," I say, though my own heart twists at the reminder. "It's not forever. We'll make it through."

She shakes her head, her gaze darting between us. “What if it doesn’t have to be like that?”

Marek and I exchange a confused glance. “What do you mean?” he asks cautiously.

Stella swallows, then lifts her chin and straightens her shoulders. “When I landed in Towerfall, you made me a proposal,” she begins, her voice growing steadier with each word. “And I accepted. Now I have a proposal for both of you.”

My heart squeezes as her words hang in the air. Marek shifts beside me, but I don’t dare look at him.

She takes another deep inhale and continues. “I never thought I’d want to be in another relationship, much less married. But the Universe dropped me here, between you two, placing me exactly where I needed to be. And before I knew it, I’d fallen for you. Both of you.”

The confession strikes like lightning, setting every nerve in my body alight.

“I love you,” she says, her eyes shining. “Both of you. And now that Elara is here, I have no reason to go back to New York. So what if I stayed? What if we made our triad official? What if we were each other’s happily ever after?”

My heart leaps, a wild, unbidden hope surging through me. It’s everything I’ve wanted, everything I never dared to let myself believe could be real. Her words crack open something deep inside me, filling the hollow spaces with light.

My gaze flits to Marek, searching for a glimmer of the same hope, for some sign that he feels what I do. But Marek would never—he’s too bound by his honor, by the weight of duty he’s carried since the moment he was old enough to understand what it meant.

Stella's gaze bounces between us, her breath coming fast, her chest rising and falling as if she's run through worlds to get here. She's searching, pleading without words, for answers, for something—anything—that might give her a sign this isn't just a beautiful, impossible dream.

And gods, I want to give it to her. I want to reach for her, pull her into my arms, and promise her the world. I want to turn to Marek and see his walls crumble. But the weight of his silence is a living, breathing thing creeping in to blanket us all.

What if he says no? What if his sense of duty is stronger than his love for us? What if this spark of hope Stella has ignited is snuffed out before it even has the chance to burn?

“Yes.”

I blink, my head snapping to Marek. “Yes what?”

Marek doesn't answer immediately. Instead, his gaze settles on Stella. Then he shifts his focus to me, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I see it. The walls are down, his emotions laid bare.

“Yes,” he says again, his voice firm now, as though daring the gods to challenge him. “I love you both. And I can't imagine a more perfect life than spending it together.”

I step toward Marek, my hands trembling slightly as I reach for him. I cradle his face, running my thumbs over the roughness of his jaw as I force him to meet my gaze. “Do you truly mean it?” I whisper, my voice cracking under the weight of what this moment could mean.

His hands come up to cover mine. “All I've ever wanted is to be with you. But I never realized something was missing—some one was missing—until Stella arrived

and completed us. She's the missing piece, Valen. She makes us whole."

A sharp ache blooms in my chest, and I press my forehead to his. And then I kiss him. It's not a kiss of desperation, like the one we shared the night before, but one full of love, hope, and the promise of a future that's suddenly here.

When I finally pull back, my heart pounding, I turn to Stella. She watches us with wide, luminous eyes, and my heart swells all over again. I take her face in my hands just as I did Marek's. Her skin is soft beneath my fingers, her breath hitching as I lean in.

I kiss her, soft and tender. It's a kiss meant to convey everything I feel for her—gratitude, affection, and a deep, abiding love that terrifies and exhilarates me in equal measure. She melts into me, her hands clutching at my wrists as though afraid to let go.

As we part, Marek steps forward. "My turn," he declares, and before Stella can react, he captures her lips in a kiss that's unmistakably Marek—possessive, commanding, leaving no room for doubt about what she means to him.

When they part, Stella is breathless, her cheeks blazing and her lips swollen. Her gaze swings between us as she struggles to catch her breath. And then, with a trembling but teasing smile, she says, "So, does this mean you accept my proposal?"

Marek and I answer in unison: "We do."

Before she can utter another word, I scoop her into my arms. Stella gasps, clutching at my shoulders in surprise. "What are you—"

Marek falls into step beside me, his eyes sparkling with mischief. No words are needed; we know each other well enough to move as one.

“What are you doing?” Stella demands through bubbles of laughter.

Marek answers first. “Consummating our marriage.”

Her mouth falls open. “That doesn’t happen until after the wedding!”

I push past the door to my bedchamber with my shoulder. “Then it’s a good thing I’m a prince and can make up new rules when it suits me.”

I stride into the room and set her down at the foot of the bed, her feet just brushing the floor as Marek steps in behind her and his hands find her hips in a way that leaves no room for retreat.

Stella makes a valiant attempt at protest, though her voice is breathless, trembling under the weight of what she knows is coming. “It took hours for me to look like this. You brutes will make a mess of me.”

Marek dips his head, brushing his lips against the exposed column of her neck. “We’ll be careful,” he murmurs against her skin.

“People will be looking for us,” she tries again, but her resolve is already cracking, her argument faltering as I step closer.

Her breath hitches as I trace my fingers along the intricate neckline of her gown, the weight of the enormous necklace resting against her collarbone. My lips follow the path of my fingers, trailing kisses along her bare shoulders.

“Let them look,” I murmur, my voice firm as I trail my mouth along the delicate curve of her jaw.

“They’ll know what we’re doing,” she whispers, her hands clutching at my sleeves.

Marek smirks against her shoulder. “Good. Then they will know you are truly ours.”

Her protest melts into a soft gasp as Marek’s lips find the sensitive spot just below her ear. The sound sends a ripple of heat through me, and I tilt her face toward mine, cradling her cheeks in my hands. My lips find hers, savoring the taste of her warmth, her sweetness, the way her body yields to me.

Marek’s hands glide up her waist, deftly finding the fastenings of her gown. He works them loose, and the fabric begins to yield, slipping off her shoulders to reveal more tantalizing glimpses of her bare skin. She shivers under his touch, her hands catching mine as her gaze flickers between us.

“The dress...”

“Will be perfectly preserved,” Marek assures her, punctuating it with a nip on her ear that elicits a shuddering whimper.

I step back to give myself space to drink her in. The gown is exquisite, but it’s Stella that holds my attention as Marek eases it down her body. It pools at her feet, her bare skin glowing in the soft morning light. Taking her hand, I help her step out of it while Marek drapes it carefully on the nearby settee and disrobes in record time.

“I swear you’re more beautiful every time I see you,” I murmur, my voice thick with awe. My fingers brush a strand of hair from her face, lingering against her cheek as her lips curve into a soft, hesitant smile.

“You make me feel like I am.” She blushes as Marek wraps his arms around her from behind, pulling her back against the hard planes of his naked body. “You two are impossible,” she says, but there’s no real protest in her voice.

“Impossible,” he echoes, his lips grazing her ear as his hands begin to explore her

curves. “But yours.”

I quickly strip off the layers of ceremonial attire I only just put on, letting the gilded fabric fall to the floor in a heap. When I rejoin them, I claim Stella’s mouth again. Her lips part beneath mine, her surrender as sweet as it is inevitable. My hands frame her face while Marek’s roam lower, tracing the curve of her hips and teasing at the edge of her curls. She’s caught between us, her body trembling, her protests long forgotten. My erection presses against her belly, and every soft sound she makes fuels the fire roaring inside me.

Stella is light and warmth, her body a sanctuary of silken softness beneath my hands. Her curves mold perfectly against me. Her kiss is honey, slow and sweet. She quiets the storm. She’s the calm I never knew I needed. With her, I find peace.

I break my kiss with Stella and fist my hand in Marek’s hair, pulling him toward me to claim his mouth next. Marek is fire and power. His hard muscles ripple under my touch. The rough scrape of his scruff singes my skin. He’s ferocious, wild, relentless. He burns through every part of me.

Between them, I’m whole. Stella’s soothing light heals my soul, while Marek’s fire fuels it, setting me ablaze. Together, they anchor me and set me free.

“Get on the bed,” Marek rasps. For a moment, I think he’s speaking to Stella, but then I feel the weight of his black gaze. The command is meant for me.

My brows shoot up in surprise. Marek’s natural dominance is no secret, but he’s never attempted to dominate me .

He draws Stella more firmly against him and takes a step back, keeping his eyes locked on mine. “Do you trust me?”

The answer comes without thought. “Always.”

“Then get on the bed.” He pauses, then one side of his mouth lifts. “Please.”

That single “please” does two things for me: it reassures me that Marek isn’t attempting to reverse our roles entirely, and it guarantees he won’t be punished later with the chastity cage. I could push back. Usually, I would. While he’s not outright taking control of me, he is taking control of the moment, steering the scene in a direction outside our norm. It’s bold, unexpected, and tempting.

I let the curiosity win. Slowly, I climb onto the bed, deliberately holding his gaze as I move. The mattress dips under my weight as I settle back, lacing my hands behind my head and propping myself against the pillows.

“Does this suit your needs, Captain Drayk?”

“It does indeed,” he says, turning to face me while still holding Stella, his arms wrapped around her middle possessively. “Our sorceress is about to become our princess. With your permission, my prince, I’d like to teach her what it means to serve you.”

Heat surges through me, as if he’s set fire to my veins. My blood pulses hot and thick, and a clear drop of arousal beads at the tip of my cock. “Permission granted,” I manage, my voice sounding like I dragged it through gravel.

Stella’s cheeks flush as Marek whispers something in her ear, then she turns to me, her gaze molten. She crawls toward me on the bed, sin and seduction, her curves shifting, mesmerizing. When she reaches me, she straddles my hips, settling her weight over me and sending a jolt of anticipation through my body.

Behind Stella, Marek kneels, his powerful thighs bracketing her hips as he presses

close, his chest brushing against her back. His hands slide over her curves, steadying her while his dark eyes lock on mine.

One of Marek's hands slips lower, brushing between Stella's legs. Her body responds instantly, a soft gasp escaping her lips as his fingers explore, moving in deliberate, teasing strokes that leave her trembling.

"You're perfect for us," Marek murmurs, his lips grazing her ear. The low rumble of his voice sends a shiver through us both. "And soon, you'll understand just how much we mean that."

He adjusts his position and begins to guide his thick cock inside her. I watch, captivated, as Stella arches, and her head falls back against his shoulder with a gasping cry. Inch by inch, he fills her, his length swallowed up until he's buried to the hilt. The sight of them together—the way they fit so perfectly—steals what little breath I have left.

Marek's movements are unhurried and deliberate as he fucks her above me. One hand slides up to knead her breasts and pinch her nipples while the other works tight circles around the bundle of nerves between her legs.

I'm enthralled by the sight of his cock coated in her slick honey as he impales her sweet cunt again and again. My fists clench at my sides, my body taut with restraint as I watch Marek worship her with his touch, his lips grazing her shoulder and his voice a low growl of praise meant only for her. It takes every ounce of discipline I have not to take control, not to take what I want.

"First, princess," he says, his authoritative words mixing with Stella's moans. "Out there, we are equals. You are ours as much as we are yours, and we will cherish you and treat you as the queen you will one day become. But here..." He pauses to thrust, eliciting another soft moan from her. "Here, behind closed doors, we serve our

prince. We treat him with respect and address him as such. He is the sovereign ruler over our bodies, our pleasure, and our pain. In return, he will love us and care for us, always.”

Emotion swells in my chest, so potent it nearly drowns me. I grip Stella’s thighs, needing to touch her, to anchor myself in this moment.

“Second, in respect to you and me,” he continues, “I will always defer to our prince, but when allowed or when we’re alone, I will be your captain. You will address me as such and give me the same respect you would the prince. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Captain, I understand,” she answers breathlessly.

“Good fucking girl,” he growls at her temple. His next thrust is almost violent with the force of his lust from hearing those words from her lips.

Stella cries out, an expression of sheer ecstasy on her face and the proof of it dripping down her inner thighs.

“Third and final thing to remember, princess. While we may find pleasure in each other alone, we are only whole when the three of us are together. Do you want us to show you how good it will be?”

“It feels like I’ve been waiting for this—for you— my whole life,” she whispers, her voice trembling with emotion and desire. “Yes, I want this. I want us.”

Marek holds still inside her and shifts, lifting her slightly, his strong hands steadying her quaking body. With a sharp nod, he signals me forward. I grip my cock, the sensation almost too much to bear as I guide the crown to Stella’s entrance. Even with how much she’s dripping from Marek’s efforts, this won’t be easy.

Stella gasps as I slowly press inside. The dual sensations of her silken inner walls and the veined, rigid underside of Marek's cock feel like fucking heaven. "That's it, pet," I croon. "Nice and slow. Relax for us. Let me in."

Marek leans down, his lips brushing against her ear as his fingers find the sensitive bundle of nerves between her thighs. "You're incredible, Stella," he murmurs. "You're taking us both so perfectly. Just breathe, love."

Her body trembles, her soft moans spurring me on as I press deeper. My hands move to Marek's thighs, guiding him to move them up and down on my cock in shallow strokes, easing me inside bit by bit, until I'm fully seated.

"Gods," I groan. "You feel...perfect."

Marek's hips begin to move, and my own thrusts are shallow at first, matching his pace. Stella's moans rise in pitch, blending with Marek's guttural growls and my soft grunt as the three of us move as one. The wet glide of our bodies, the whispered praise, gasps and sighs—it's all-consuming. My hands slide to Stella's waist, gripping her firmly as I thrust deeper, harder, my movements aligning perfectly with Marek's.

Time loses all meaning. There's only us—the push and pull of our bodies, the shared breaths, the synchronized rhythm of our hearts. In this moment, we aren't three people. We're a singular force, a union forged in love, passion, and unbreakable trust.

We don't need a ceremony; that's for the rest of the court. This is our vow. This binds us in ways words could never. And when we crest together, a shared cry tearing from our lips, the world shatters into light and heat, pleasure and love—a vow etched into our very souls.

As the waves of ecstasy ebb, we collapse onto the bed, limbs tangled and hearts

drumming. Stella rests her head on my chest, her tiara askew, curls damp and wild. Marek's strong arms wrap around us both as our breaths slow and sync.

For a long moment, we bask in the afterglow.

Stella shifts slightly, her fingers trailing over my chest before she lets out a breathy laugh. "What was that about not making me a mess?"

Marek chuckles, the rumble of it vibrating through the bed.

I tilt my head down to kiss her damp curls. "You'll forgive us, won't you, pet?"

She hums softly, a playful smirk curling her lips. "I don't know... It's going to take a lot of effort to fix this."

I grin, brushing a thumb over her flushed cheek. "Then let's get started. Marek, order a bath for our bride. We've thoroughly ravished her. It's only right we make her presentable."

Marek props himself on one elbow, his dark eyes glinting. "As you command, Your Highness."

I press a kiss to Stella's forehead and another to Marek's lips before sliding out of bed.

Marek raises a brow as he watches me pull on my discarded clothes. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To find my parents," I reply, buttoning the silver swords that decorate the front of my coat. "I'll tell them to push the ceremony back an hour—and prepare them for what's to come."

“And after that?” Stella asks.

“After that, we set the stage for our future.”

Marek sits up. “We should all go. The three of us should stand as one and let them know our duty will not only be to the kingdom but to each other.”

“You’re right,” I say, meeting Marek’s steady gaze. “If we’re going to do this, we need to start as we mean to go on.”

“Together.” Stella smiles.

“But first.” I pause in the doorway, my lips curving into a smile. “I’m off to the market.”

“The market?” Marek echoes. “What could you possibly need at the market?”

I glance back at them, my grin widening. “A third wedding ring.”

Five

I keep my eyes closed so tightly, my eyelids ache as the world shudders and jolts, each gallop of the horse sending a spike of pain through my side. I cling to the rider's arm wrapped warm and solid across my chest while the horse charges down the cobbled streets through the pelting rain.

Eventually, the hoofbeats steady and slow, no longer wild, sharp hammers on stone, and I crack open my eyes to a blur of iron-gray skies, rolling hills dotted with shadowed stone cabins, and a distant dense line of massive pines.

I shield my face from the spitting rain and peer around the rider's broad shoulder. A castle grows like a fang from the center of the small town we're escaping, its turrets and keep, jagged edges silhouetted in the night sky.

Where am I?

The rider's heart beats a steady, strong rhythm against my back, strangely calming, strangely safe. His hold tightens around me as the horse jumps over a fallen tree. The pain in my side breathes fire through my core when we land, eviscerating my second of calm. I bite back a scream, my fingers digging into his arm.

She's a witch!

The knife...the blood...the snarling crowd.

I press my cold fingers to the spray of blood now sticky on my cheek. He killed those

men. This rider has a sword and cut them down like they were paper.

But he saved my life...

Another searing jolt of pain rips through me, and I press my hand against my side. Warmth gushes between my fingers, slick and dark. My breath catches, a sharp intake that's half sob, half gasp. It's blood. My blood. But this can't be real.

The rider feels my shift, his hold tightening, his body adjusting to support mine more fully.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask, my voice quivering with the layer of freezing rain pelting my bare legs and soaking through my dress, rumpled and torn and bunched up around my waist so my thighs can grip the saddle.

His exhales are even and smooth, his chest a welcome warmth pressed firmly to my back. "Away." The word is a rumble against my body that joins the vibrations from the steady drum of hooves on the wet dirt road.

An owl cries, and I don't think I've ever been somewhere so quiet. I take a deep breath and fill my lungs with air as crisp and clean as fresh snow. There's a peace out here that people would pay good money for, but each time I close my eyes, I see the glint of a sword and men dropping to the cobblestones like rain.

"Where are you taking me?" I repeat. Pain sparks in my side as I squirm against the steel strap of his arm across my chest to look up at him.

The hood of his cloak half shrouds his face, but the dull filter of moonlight through the clouds reveals the grim line of his mouth, the sharp cut of his jaw, and the dark lashes that frame his onyx eyes. It's him. The man from the elevator, the man from the bedroom with its velvet walls and gilded furniture. The man who wouldn't let me go. My abductor. Rescuer. Captor.

“How many of you are there?”

He scoffs, his dark gaze meeting mine. “I am the one and only.”

I blink away the rain dripping into my eyes, my mind reeling as it searches for solid ground amid flashes of this man pulling me from the bloodthirsty mob, saving me, but holding me now, taking me...where?

Holy shit. I’m being kidnapped. Again!

My thoughts comb through my browser history, a million open tabs, a million half-read articles to prepare for a situation just like this, but I can’t fight him here—on a horse charging into the forest.

Think, Hannah! Think.

I shiver, the chill of the night and the panic of my abduction seeping into my bones.

Don’t let them take you to a second location.

But that time has long passed. And there are no taillights to kick out, no 911 calls to make, no first responders to rely on—only the woody scent of wet earth, the swaying boughs of nearby pines, the distant screech of hunting owls, and the captor firm as a rock behind me.

“Listen, you should know that I have people who care about me. I have a family and a boyfriend and a—a cat.” The lies come out in a jumble as I try to humanize myself, each word forming a house of cards that falls before it’s even built. “What I mean is that I’m Hannah, and I really, really want to go home. I wasn’t even supposed to be at Chad’s apartment building tonight. I should have been at Giovanni’s celebrating a deal. My deal. I mean...it was my deal, but fucking Stephanie—”

“Are you ever quiet?” he cuts in with a harsh whisper.

“I’m being kidnapped!”

His chuckle thrums against my back, and his grip around me tightens. “If I wanted a woman, I wouldn’t have to take one.”

Something about his tone and the roughness of his skin against mine makes me want to believe him, but the fear bubbling through me makes that impossible.

“I’m...I’m a good person, okay?” I whisper. “I volunteer on weekends...” Not true. “And—and my mom, she’s waiting for me to...” To call for the first time in six months instead of sending short texts? Wow, this is seriously depressing and definitely not the way I thought I’d reevaluate my life.

A wave of dizziness presses against me. He holds me closer; his arm is an iron band around my chest, the only thing keeping me from tumbling into the shadows. Moonlight catches on my dress, and I peer down at the fabric saturated with a liquid too warm and dark and thick to be rain. Blood, so much blood, trickles down my leg and over the saddle.

“Am I dying?” The words are breathy against my cold lips as I watch the dark river trail down my thigh, my knee, wrapping around my calf like a snake.

Against my back, he softens, barely, only for an instant before he returns to steel. His breath clouds the cold air, the steady beat of his heart the only thing keeping me from shattering.

“Not if I can help it. Now be quiet ,” he commands.

And this time, I obey.

* * *

I close my eyes, holding back tears, and focus on the horse's steady gallop as my head lolls back against his shoulder, and I swim in a sea of dizziness and blood loss. I shiver, my teeth chattering, goose bumps cresting on my skin with cold and fear.

The horse slows, and my eyelids flutter open as we descend into a wooded valley, the trees so thick, they blot out the sky.

I'm cold, so cold, and I don't want to die, but we are far from a hospital, far from any place I recognize or know.

"I can't die," I deliriously mumble. "I haven't even grown my own sourdough starter."

The rhythm of the horse's hooves softens to a slow trot, and the rider shifts behind me. The shape of a house—or what once was one—stands out against the trees, its silhouette sagging and half devoured by the forest; ivy smothers its sides, weeds sprout from the wooden shingle roof, and dead leaves scar the drooping porch steps. It's an abandoned horror-movie house—the exact kind of place a murderer would take the woman he kidnapped.

He slides down from the horse, his cloak flapping behind him, and I catch a hint of gold thread woven into its lining in intricate symbols I can't quite make out. He reaches for me, and before I can resist, he pulls me off the saddle to the fern-dotted forest floor. My trembling hands grip his cloak, so dry and warm that I wouldn't believe he'd ridden through a rainstorm if I hadn't been there myself.

My teeth chatter uncontrollably, and I'm shaking so violently, it hurts when his arms close around me. I push away from him weakly, but he lets me go.

"I—I c-can walk," I force out, although my body doesn't listen. My knees buckle,

and he's there to catch me before I hit the ground. He scoops me up like I'm full of feathers, like this is a fairy tale and he's every knight in shining armor. He holds me against his chest and steps onto the porch that creaks and groans beneath our weight.

"You're as sturdy as a newly birthed fawn," he says, the words a low hum. He kicks the door open like it's personally offended him, and we plunge into darkness.

It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the streaks of moonlight struggling to break in through the cobweb-covered windows. He sets me in a chair that protests as much as I want to and strides to a fireplace so large, it swallows half the wall. I watch his shadowed movements as he takes logs from a stacked pile of split wood and tosses them into the hearth. The fireplace coughs a plume of ash that hangs in dancing motes around his kneeling silhouette. He lights a match and mutters words I'm too tired and cold to decipher and tosses the small flame onto the wood. It flares to life in a hungry, crackling blaze that spills amber light throughout the long-forgotten small home.

Warmth brushes my exposed skin as I dazedly take in the dusty wooden furniture. A hand-carved chair like the one I'm on sits across from me, a tattered and dried-out animal pelt thrown across the seat. There's a small table in one corner of the room and a twin-size bed in the other, its covers rumpled but dust-free, recently slept in.

My dress feels like ice against my skin, and I ball my slowly warming fingers into fists in my lap. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I told you in the palace," he says, removing his cloak. "I can help you."

The palace . My head spins. "But why—Where are—"

He whips off his cape and throws it across the empty chair. The front of his gray linen shirt is wet from holding me against him and as dark as soaked stone. He peels off his shirt, and no matter how much I want to keep gawking, my lids drift closed for a

moment too long. When I reopen them, he's dressed in a dirty white shirt and warming himself in front of the fire.

"Get out of those wet clothes," he commands with a nod to my sodden dress.

"No!" I wrap my arms around my middle, defiance narrowing my brows. "I don't want to." It's a hollow rebellion. I'm freezing, and the thought of shedding my wet dress and pulling this chair closer to the fire is so delicious, my vision swims.

His lips tip into a sly smile that makes my heart skip. "Modest, are you, Little Fawn?" The moniker brings a chill to my already-frozen limbs, as if he can see right through me.

With a chuckle, he scrapes his long fingers across his stubbled cheek. "Then you'll be a modest corpse. My saving you will have been for nothing."

He's right, and I know it.

I swallow and grit my teeth against the pain in my side as I lean over to untie my boots. "Are...are you going to kill me?" I tug on the laces and slide my feet free, my hands trembling.

He lets out a frustrated sigh and crosses his arms over his chest. "Why save you from those men only to end you myself?"

I use my last ounce of strength and push myself up from the chair, my legs shaking beneath me. "Enough of this bullshit, answering my questions with questions. Who the hell are you?" My voice is stronger than I feel, each word a desperate attempt to regain some semblance of control.

He walks to me and pushes my wet hair from my shoulders, surprisingly gentle. His fingers brush the buttons on the front of my dress. He takes one small pearl between

his fingers to pop it free, but I grab his wrist.

Thick cords of muscle flex beneath my fingers as his dark eyes catch mine, holding them with an intensity that makes my breath hitch. “I am Kane, protector of the Kingdom of Pentacles and everybody within its lands.” He removes his hand from my dress and brushes his gaze over me.

I try to stand taller, to match his strength and certainty, but I’m so small compared to him.

The firelight dances across his face, highlighting the sharp angle of his jaw as he reaches for his sword. He draws it, the silver blade beaded with blood, and I take a step back, my calves bumping into the heavy wooden chair behind me.

“If I wanted you dead, Little Fawn, I wouldn’t have risked my life to save yours.” He points to the symbols etched into the steel like they’ll explain everything. The engravings match the markings stitched into his cloak, but they’re nothing I can read or have even seen before. “I am of the king’s guard.”

“The king’s guard? What is this, England?” Wild laughter itches the back of my throat, and if I weren’t so dizzy and cold, I’d erupt into hysterics. “And what year is it, 1810?”

“Why would a year have a number and not a name?” He shakes his head, his dark hair brushing his shoulders. “Ridiculous.”

“Yeah,” I scoff. “The Kingdom of Pentacles. Ridiculous.”

Pentacles ... The star inside the circle—like the back of the card in the snow and the gold embroidery along the border of the deep-red silk in the bedroom...

My pulse beats between my ears, a frantic drummer midbattle, as I whirl to look at

the room around me. And, for the first time, I see it, really see it.

The stone walls have no outlets. There are no wires coiling in the corners. There were none hanging along the road we came down. There isn't even a sink. There's no bathroom at all. I turn, my mind skipping, unable to see a single modern thing in the cabin. Not one.

"No. No, no, no," I breathe, rounding the chair, putting it between him and me and the rapidly unfolding truth. "Where were the streetlights? There were no streetlights! And the cobblestones. The sheep! There was a sheep in the middle of the city, and you—you—you—where are all the outlets?"

His ground-eating strides bring him to me in an instant. "Sit down, Fawn." He takes my arm and tries to guide me back to the chair.

"I told you, I'm Hannah !"

I wrench my arm free, stumbling back. My heel catches on the uneven floor, and I almost fall, but I clutch the edge of a rough-hewn table. My fingers brush over its surface, feeling the grooves of the wood, the splinters. The room is dimly lit by candles—actual candles—not a single electric bulb in sight. My mind races, trying to latch onto something familiar, something that makes sense. But there's nothing.

"Those people in the bar had never seen a phone," I whisper. "They didn't know what Wi-Fi was."

Kane is tense, but there's a softness in his eyes, as though he can see that I'm falling apart. That everything is falling...falling into place too fast and too real.

"This is actually happening, isn't it?"

He simply stands there, his silence an answer in itself.

“And I just fell. I just...appeared.”

See the door and open it.

I saw the door, and I fell through. This is not in Chicago. Not even Illinois.

I'm in another world.

Panic sends my heart into my throat and my arms beating against him.

He grabs my shoulders, those dark eyes taking in mine. He has to see it—see that my mind is cracking in half with the truth. Because it is the truth, and I've known it on some level since the sidewalk swung open and I landed in the palace.

“How...how do I get home?” I whisper, my voice shaking.

Heavy drops of rain splatter onto the stone floor, and I look down. No, not rain...blood. My blood paints the floor in crimson splotches, and he tightens his grip on my arms.

“How do I get home?” I repeat, the world going dark around the edges. “How do I get home?”

“You must find the Empress, Hannah,” he whispers, his words warm against my cheek. The last thing I feel as I surrender to the dark.

Want more from Kristin Cast?

Order *The Empress*